

**The Reason We Dance:  
Holistic Learning Through Traditional Cultural  
Practices**

**by  
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## Abstract

This study explores the positioning of folkloric dance (kolo) as a manifestation of a holistic way of being. The purpose of my inquiry is to develop practice-based understandings for participation in cultural activities as a process for holistic development of a person within community and its extension within societies. I exclusively focus on how cultural activities, particularly dancing in kolo, impacts the people who are engaged in the practice.

My dissertation explores my engagement with folkloric dance, specifically in relation to holistic learning. I discuss this topic through four intertwining themes: the development of the whole person; the pedagogy of ceremony, particularly acquiring traditional knowledge; the role of folkloric dance in holistic development; and the relation of engagement in cultural activities with identity formation and spiritual attentiveness.

The exploration of these themes guided me towards an inquiry into the profound reasons we engage in cultural activities, particularly why we dance. I build upon hermeneutic, mythopoetic, arts-based research to offer forward an understanding of what it means to learn holistically and even further, how we acquire knowledge necessary for being and becoming in the world. My relationship with Serbian and Balkan knowledge traditions and communities centres my inquiry into cultural practices. I propose that traditional knowledge is acquired through cultural activities, specifically dancing in kolo and holding hands.

Integral to this dissertation are the stories that I collected from eight knowledge holders. These scholars, educators, musicians, and dancers have profoundly enriched my inquiry and understanding. I share their stories as a collection of pedagogical teachings that clearly indicates the profound impact of these cultural practices towards the transformation of our humanness.

I envision *The Reason We Dance* as an inspiration for my readers to explore their own engagement in cultural activities while observing the multiple ways these engagements impact them.

**Keywords:** arts education; holistic learning; Indigenous epistemologies; spirituality; embodied ways of knowing; cultural practices; folkloric dance as a holistic way of being; kolo;





I dedicate this work to my wise Ancestors and my loving Descendants. Your love is my moving force and my love for you is endless. All this is for you...



## Acknowledgements

I write this dissertation from a position of a settler learning to live on the lands of the peoples of the unceded territories of the Coast Salish Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), sə́ilwətaʔt̓ (Tseil-Waututh), x̣ṃəθḳẉəʔəm (Musqueam), ḳẉiḳẉəł̣əm (Kwikwetlem), ǰíćəý (Katzie), Kwantlen, Semyome (Semiahmoo), qiqéyt (Qayqayt), sc̣əwaθen məsteyəx̣w (Tsawwassen), and numerous Stó:lō Nations.

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## Glossary

Serbia	Officially the Republic of Serbia, is an interior country situated at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe in the southern Pannonian Plain and the central Balkans.
Montenegro	A country located in the west-central Balkans at the southern end of the Dinaric Alps on the Adriatic Sea.
Yugoslavia	Was a country in Southeast Europe and Central Europe for most of the 20th century. It came into existence after World War I in 1918 under the name of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes by the merger of the Kingdom of Serbia with the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (provisional State of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), and constituted the first union of the South Slavic people as a sovereign state. Peter I of Serbia was its first sovereign.
Balkan	Also known as the Balkan Peninsula, is a geographic region in southeastern Europe. The countries that are part of the region such as Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Greece to name a few, are called the Balkan states or just the Balkans.
Pronunciation Guide	C as in <u>ca</u> ts Č as in <u>ch</u> urch Ć as in <u>t</u> une (British) Dj as in en <u>d</u> ure (British) Dž as in <u>j</u> ob or <u>g</u> eorge J as in <u>y</u> es Lj as in mi <u>ll</u> ion (British) Nj as in ca <u>n</u> yon Š as in <u>sh</u> e Ž as in pleas <u>u</u> re (Stefanović Karadžić et al., 1997, p. ix)



## Preface

I am the second daughter of Marija Novaković and Milovan Dujović. I am a Serbian-Canadian woman born in Montenegro and raised in Serbia. In my early twenties, I moved to the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, Vancouver, Canada, where I still live.

My inquiry began many years ago, when I started to notice warning indicators of a single dominant culture prevalence and its negative consequences. Some aspects of this phenomenon, such as rigid and reductive approaches to building knowledge, left me concerned with what I was increasingly witnessing in my professional and personal capacity: a reduction of the wholeness of our humanness—curiosity, creativity, and imagination. Being a mother to young children and a student myself, I have experienced those dehumanized, compartmentalized, and fragmented educational practices. Unable to find a crack that allows a light to enter<sup>1</sup>, I carried this deep concern about the loss of humanness that felt as a wound in my holistic sense of self.

Around the beginning of my doctoral journey, my family was visiting a local Serbian festival. As many times before, while my daughters were playing with their friends, I joined a dance party—igranka<sup>2</sup>. I danced in the traditional folkloric dance, “kolo<sup>3</sup>,” many times and for years, but in that moment, while dancing, I recognized that I needed to re-animate my sense of whole in *my* cultural practice, because when I dance, when I am in *kolo*—I am healing, and I am whole.

Soon after that evening of Igranka, as another pivotal point of my journey, I was invited to participate in an intensive interdisciplinary exchange amongst faculty and students. Dr. Vicki Kelly and Dr. Brenda Morrison organized the Simon Fraser University President's Dream Colloquium on Returning to the Teachings: Justice, Identity and Belonging. Through ceremony, public lectures and dialogue, they created an opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> “There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.” Leonard Cohen

<sup>2</sup> In Serbian for a community dance party.

<sup>3</sup> Kolo dances are those dances in which the pursuit of dance is manifested in such was that bodily movements are intended to express human feelings and satisfy the human need, sense, and experience of beauty. For this reason, some have called kolo “the poetry of bodily movements.” Kolo is a combination of rhythmic body movements, such that follow the rhythm of songs or music.



for diverse community engagement and knowledge mobilization, and with that, we were building capacity for a new vision. Through this rich experience, we witnessed Indigenous cultures reclamation and resurgence, which represented exactly what I was trying to reconcile in myself.

Kolo, Oro, Hora,  
Hour; Circle; Time;  
Seasonal celebration; Period;  
Season; Cycle; Dance.  
From Latin *hōra* (“hour”), Hebrew הָרָוּהַ (hóra), Yiddish עֲרָוּהַ (hóre), Romanian *horă*, Turkish *hora*, Greek χορός related to Pontic Greek *khoron*, Bulgarian *xopo*, Macedonian *opo*, Serbian *kolo*. In many Slavic languages the verb *oriti* means “to speak, sound, sing” and “to celebrate, to dance”: *Pesma se ori*—The song can be heard far, the song echoes. *Hajde u kolo*—Let’s go dance!

In Montenegro *oro* is also a sitting (meeting), a sitting with dancing, a dance event. *Kolo* (*horo*) is, as is well known, a form of dance in which the dancers, as they stand side by side, holding hands, and creating a chain, all dance the same way. (Janković & Janković, 1936, pp. 10-11)

*Kolo* is inscribed on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2017) “*Kolo* is a traditional, collective folk dance performed by dancers who are interlinked to form a chain, usually moving in a circular line holding hands with their arms down. It is performed to the accompaniment of music at private and public gatherings and involves all members of the local community.” (para 1)

*Kolo* extends beyond dance. *Kolo* bonds physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual realms. *Kolo* may be a verb, a noun, or a way of life. To properly acknowledge the multifariousness of the term *kolo*, I will not write it with the articles *the* or *a* in this dissertation.





The word kolo is considered an Ancient Slavic term, because it is found in the same or similar form in most Slavic languages. There are several uses of the word kolo in Serbian and Balkan traditional practices (Rakočević, 2005). In the book *Kolo among South Slavs*, Mladenović (1973) distinguished five of them: 1) the form of a dance (as a chain of interconnected dancers, male, female, or mix) that is moving on a typically circular trajectory, but it could be spiral, serpentine, or even straight; 2) a group of people (number may be limited or unlimited) dancing; 3) a public meeting/event where the dances are occurring; 4) the type/kind of a dance which was performed in accordance with a specific melody; 5) a round-shaped dance, performed to a melody and/or lyrics, typical and with stylistic features specific to a geographical or ethnical group. While Mladenović recognized the first definition as the most commonly used, and the most comprehensive is the last one, because it explains kolo as “indivisible unity of shapes, types, and styles of dancing—by all that together, the kolo has been determined as an ethnic category in more precise manner without depriving it of some wider meaning” (Mladenović, 1978, p. 482).

Kolo is nourishing, teaching, healing, and supporting us to relate to one another and our surroundings, helping us achieve our “ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human” (Freire, 1972, p. 55).



The views, sentiments, ideas, positions, beliefs, and values presented as a braided text, a *métissage* (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009), are my personal conclusions based on my practice as a researcher, educator, visual artist, and dancer. My own relationship to the Serbian community centres my inquiry within cultural practices. As a continuation, my involvement with the Balkan folkloric community is presenting me with the opportunity to observe how these similar yet different cultures respond and affect one another. Nepo (2020) offered, “I am a Jew that’s for certain. But what this means keeps unfolding like a sea that sends part of itself to shore while keeping its depth away from all shores” (p. 43). I write this dissertation from my depths<sup>4</sup>. My lived experience

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<sup>4</sup> “The connection between personal mythology, cultural mythology, and the education process is complex and dynamic” (Cajete, 2017, p. 118).



supports me in navigating through this hermeneutic, mythopoetic journey<sup>5</sup>. With that, the focus of this study is to examine the pedagogical approaches of folkloric songs and dances as a way of acquiring traditional knowledge, both as a container of knowledge and a methodology of passing it onto the generations that follow. “The artist is projecting, in his or her work, the social influence, the political influence, the ideological influence, with which the artist lives” (Freire, 2000, as cited in Walsh et al., 2012, p. 12). In this work I too project social, political, and ideological influences kolo creates for me.



While my focus is on songs and dances as a primary means to engage in cultural practices, I am cognizant of our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional impairments and limitations. As an able-bodied person with an invisible disability, I invite all disabled and abled to join my kolo, because being in kolo means more than moving the body to the beat of the music.



I invite you to join me on my journey. I travel by dancing in kolo and writing stories. I invite you to listen deeply to the stories I share. I wrote them for you—a reader who will be “listened to and encouraged by the text to hear himself from the depth of the language or the unconscious” (Daignault, 2005, p. 7). I also wrote them for all to whom I listened and learned from. I grouped the stories in five sections to which I refer to as kolos: the first one represents the stories from my youth; the second describes the extensive research I conducted; the third focuses on the methods I employed; the fourth are the stories the knowledge holders shared; and the fifth kolo is a collection of pedagogical teachings that I offer to you, my Dear Reader<sup>6</sup>. Aiming to conjure up the

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<sup>5</sup> “Globally, Indigenous Peoples, through their use of various mythopoetic forms of communication, applied strategies and orientations to learning that are important to revive and nourish in today’s global education. Modern people, for the most part, have become ‘mythically blind’ and suffer all the consequences stemming from such a ‘handicap’ because their natural poetic sensibility has been ‘schooled’ out of them. Thinking and communicating ‘poetically’ through the structures of myth is a natural expression of human learning which has been evolving for the last 40,000 years” (Cajete, 2017, p. 124).

<sup>6</sup> There are two reading audiences: “the one at the end of the book, at an academic conference in the future, who are free to read but not always empathetic as one might wish; and the individual reader of the book at any given time. That is the ‘real’ reader, the Dear Reader for whom every writer writes.” (Atwood, 1985, p. xvii)



full(er) picture of the culture I am presenting here, I began with the story of Igranka, which continues at the beginning of each section/kolo.

Ideally, I would be able to physically hold your hand and dance with you, but as a second-best thing, I included notations and movement patterns of the selected dances/kolos, so maybe you, my readers, will be able to learn these kolos on your own. Also, instead of sharing videos where you can see *other* people's experience of dancing, I drew and painted *my* visions of these kolos, with the goal to bring you into the depths of *my* experiences. In the effort of conjuring up emotions and spirits involved in the act of kolo dancing, I invite your attention to the frozen moments in time-space of how it once *was* and how it can *be* again. I encourage you to search for your reflections in those illustrations and imagine.



Please, come in to my avlija<sup>7</sup>! As you make your way through the crowd, you will smell freshly prepared roštilj<sup>8</sup> and Svadbarski Kupus<sup>9</sup> simmering in a clay pot over hot coals. You will hear musicians tuning their instruments while discussing what song to play first, you will see young men and women standing close to one another, chatting, and laughing in anticipation of the first kolo, and you will sense the exhilaration that make you “remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. ix).

Take my hand, and I will lead you from kolo to kolo.

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<sup>7</sup> In Serbian for a yard around the house.

<sup>8</sup> A Serbian traditional method of grilling meat.

<sup>9</sup> In Serbian for a Wedding Cabbage—traditional Serbian dish consisting of sour cabbage, onions, paprika, bay leaves, pepper, and meat such as pork, veal, lamb, and bacon.





## Kolo Ends and Begins Again

### *Вила Зида Град*

*Град градила б'јела вила  
Ни на небу ни на земљу,  
Но на грану од облака;  
На град гради троје врата:  
Једна врата сва од злата,  
Друга врата од бисера,  
Трећа врата од шкерлета.  
Што су врата суха злата,  
На њих вила сина жени;  
Што су врата од бисера,  
На њих вила кћер удава;  
Што су врата од шкерлета,  
На њих вила сама сједи,  
Сама сједи, погледује,  
Ђе се муња с громом игра,  
Мила сестра су два брата  
А невеста с два ђевера;  
Муња грома надиграла,  
Мила сестра оба брата,  
А невеста два ђевера.*

*(Stefanović Karadžić et al., 1997, p. 15)*

The white vila builds a city,  
Neither in heaven nor on earth,  
But upon a cloud bank;  
She builds a city with three doors:  
The first door all made of gold,  
The second door of pearl,  
The third door made of scarlet.  
At the gold door  
She gives her son a wedding;  
At the pearl door  
She gives her daughter a wedding;  
At the scarlet door,  
She sits by herself,  
She sits by herself and observes,  
How the lightning plays with thunder,  
As a sister with her two brothers,  
And a bride with her two brothers-in-law;  
The lightning outwits the thunder,  
As a sister her two brothers,  
And a bride her two brothers-in-law.

A vila is a mythical form of a fairy or a spirit often described as “white” or “mountainous” (gorska vila).



*Птица по перју, а човек се по беседи познаје.*

*You know a bird by its feathers, and a man by his speech.  
~ Serbian proverb*

## **Igranka, Part I: At the Festival**

Wooden tambourines and decorative frulas<sup>10</sup> neatly arranged beside the small pieces of Šumadija's<sup>11</sup> tapestries on a bright red velvet cloth. Old colourful pottery dishes set up on the folding table at the south sidewalk in front of the Church. Right beside it, is a table with miniature dolls, dressed in traditional costumes from cultural regions, and baskets full of bottle openers, keychains, and coasters that somebody brought from the old country. Probably from the vacation this past summer.

It is only 11 and already crowded. It is unusually hot for early September. The sun is burning my head but I do not mind—it feels like home. I sense familiar quivers in my chest. My soul needs to be here and my body warns me: nostalgia incapacitates and leaves me empty for a long while. The thought of it tightens my throat and I must stop walking. My yearning forces me forward. I inhale and continue down the lane.

A woman I know from around is selling religious themed needlepoints stretched on shiny frames. She dynamically gestures explaining her techniques in broken English. Her teenage daughter, uninvolved with the situation, checks her phone and only occasionally lifts her head up to look at the customer. As if she wants to make sure they can understand her mother's elucidations. Among the crafts I see the national Serbian flag colours, red-blue-white, handknitted on baby clothes. Instantly, I fall in love with an adorable pair of baby booties, but I know Sanja, my nephew's wife, will not let me buy anything before the baby is born. They say it is bad luck.

A big line of tables with books: the latest Serbian literature, most recent novels, diaspora's favourites—history publications, imported packaged food, wooden toys, costume jewelry and accessories. Even enameled tin round pans for burek<sup>12</sup> and

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<sup>10</sup> The frula is a native instrument of Serbia. It is a small wooden flute with six holes. Customarily, the frula was played by shepherds while tending their flocks.

<sup>11</sup> A region in the central part of Serbia.

<sup>12</sup> A baked filled with cheese or meat pastry made of a thin flaky dough.



earthenware casserole dishes for prebranac<sup>13</sup>. Anything that one might need to keep the “proper” household running. At the following table, my friend’s kids are selling popcorn—these girls definitely grew up overnight! I have not seen them in a few months and now they have blossomed into beautiful young women. They look so serious listening to their father demonstrating how to use a popcorn machine. He speaks in Serbian; they nod and ask an occasional question in English. “Jednostavno je<sup>14</sup>,” he assures them.

Both streets bordering the Church are closed for traffic. Folks who organize the festival always manage to get the permit from the City. Apparently, twenty-seven years ago when they first organized Serbian Days, people barely knew about it, and now thousands attend. They say that every year increasingly non-Serbians join. I have heard someone say that is what it means to be socially accepted. As a nation.

The community gathers for a weekend of old country’s food, music, and songs. They come to buy a thing or two, to chat with the people they know, to light a candle for the dead and for the health of the living. Above all else, to get together for Saturday’s night igranka<sup>15</sup>. Igranka, more than a dance party, is an emotional experience, an intermix of enjoyment, sharing, learning, teaching, healing, often simply being—stripped of the imposed external social norms. Undeniably, the climax of the three-day festival.

People arrive at different times—some early in the morning, some throughout the day and evening. I see young and old, single and in groups, families with aging parents, young children. Some are dressed casually, and some formally in Church clothes.

I smile, noticing a couple of teenagers separate from their families immediately after they arrive, trying to locate their friends. Even some younger children attempt to disappear into the crowds. Ana struggles to pull her hand from my grasp. She cranes her neck, flaring her wide-open eyes at me, asking to be let free. I deeply sigh and let go of her. Kalina follows without even glancing at me, and together they vanish, moving swiftly

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<sup>13</sup> A casserole of caramelized onions and white beans, in a sauce flavoured with bay leaves and sweet red paprika.

<sup>14</sup> In Serbian for “It’s simple.” [my translation].

<sup>15</sup> In Serbian for a community dance party, a term typically used in rural areas where folk songs are played.



between tight spaces appreciating the sudden “homeland” freedom they unexpectedly found.

The loud new-folk Serbian music blasting from several locations is overpowering the chatter. It is not my favourite, so it overwhelms me, and I wonder if that is the price we pay for enjoying everything else. I step aside waiting for Saša to park the car.

A middle-aged couple catch my attention. They brought their non-Serbian friends and now, nonchalant but cheery and beaming with pride, amble through the crowds toward the main building. They often stop to greet the people they know by vigorously shaking hands and three-times-cheek kissing—a Serbian social ritual. The man is tall standing with a mix of a seraphic and solemn facial expression and puffed-out chest. He gestures with his extended arm, pointing out to his guests all the Serbian wonders that surround us. The pair’s guests are smiling and nodding their heads every time their hosts holler something in their ears trying to overcome the noise. Slightly embarrassed, I am still impressed and proud of their attempt to popularize our culture. “Whoever is ashamed of their origin, will rust forever<sup>16</sup>” a teaching by Njegoš<sup>17</sup> is deeply entrenched in our cultural upbringing.

As we came closer to the building, the sounds of music are growing even louder. I feel as if I am back home, surrounded by familiar smells of food, sounds of the mother tongue, the glances of well-known figures, faces, dresses, patterns. High notes of frula are melting the armour that covers my heart I did not even know existed until this moment—it must have started forming around the time when I landed in Canada. My heart was exposed and raw, and I needed to protect it. As the time passed and with every new custom and every new phrase of a new language I learned, another impregnable layer appeared around my heart, as it was trying to protect a secret. Forever.

We enter the hall, a sudden contrast from the brightness outside, the hall is dark only dimly lit by a few narrow windows. The space, pulsing in the accelerating rhythm of frula, accordion, and pipes, is packed with people. Half of the hall is set up with round tables that seat eight, and the other half is left empty for dancing. Opposite to us is

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<sup>16</sup> “Ko se stidi svog porijekla, vazda rđa dovijeka” [my translation].

<sup>17</sup> A Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, poet and philosopher, 1813-1851.



another entrance closer to the outside barbeque. Some people are coming in with their food plates, sitting down at the far tables to eat. The air is heavy with late summer humidity, sentiments, and a smell of ćevapi<sup>18</sup>. We are stuck at the entrance, not able to go in. A person in front of me moves and suddenly I am vis-à-vis several dozens of women and men with arms interwoven into Serbian kolo.

The dancers are now right in front of us, and I can see the beads of sweat dripping down their faces, necks, chests. The rhythm is so fast, their legs are struggling to keep up with the steps, but their bodies are safely interlocked with one another. With the heat rising, their mouths are gasping for air, drawn into awkward smiles, almost apologizing for punishing their weakening bodies by dancing, so that they can nourish their starved souls. Kolo is widely spiralling around the room like an autumn wind blowing between trees—loud and heavy with emotions. The musicians are starting another kolo, playing my favourite tune. I step toward the dancers, and two women unlock their hand-grip as an invitation to join. Kolo swallows me instantly in its ascending pattern. At that moment, spirit transmutes into a much different, more innocent, genuine, almost angelic state of being—and as I shed the skin of my socially accepted self, I start to dance.

## Šetnja Kolo: Notation and Movement Pattern

Let us begin with Šetnja, a simple and contemplative kolo. This kolo is usually danced as the first dance of the event. While dancing, dancers pleurably chat, turn toward each other. Young unmarried women giggle looking at the available young men; Young men puff out their chest proudly, flirt, smile; Married, older men and women are mixed with other dancers, there is no formality in positioning.

Originally this kolo is from central Serbia, Šumadija, known as the “Green heart of Serbia.” The name Šetnja (Shéh-t-nyah) means a leisure walk or a stroll. In my illustration below (see Figure 1) a young woman is walking slowly, linking arms, and leaning lightly on two men, one on each side of her. They could be her brothers, cousins, neighbours, or one could be her sweetheart. They are dressed in typical Šumadija’s

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<sup>18</sup> In Serbian for a grilled dish of minced meat found traditionally in the countries of southeast Europe.



clothing, wool skirts and pants, cotton shirts, jelek (tight vests), gunj (sheepskin vests), opanci (leather footwear), and always present Serbian men's hats, šajkača. Relaxed, still chatting, they begin to dance in anticipation of even more exciting tunes and moves. Šetnja's rhythm is simple, 2/4 with the accent on a count one. Typically, it starts with women singing the following lyrics:

*Prođi Mile kroz naš kraj,  
pa da vidiš šta je raj;*<sup>19</sup>

The dancers take position with their left hands firmly placed on their waists, and their right hands hooked through bent left arms of a dancer in front. The upper body does not move much while the legs move in the following pattern:

The dancers face centre, their bodies slightly rotated toward the right side<sup>20</sup> and they move in a line of dance (LOD). They dance two walking steps in LOD: step on R ft<sup>21</sup> (ct 1<sup>22</sup>); bounce on R ft (ct &); step on L ft crossing in front of R ft (ct 2); bounce on L ft (ct &). Three smaller faster steps in LOD: R ft (ct 1), L ft (ct &), R ft (ct 2)—Weight on R ft, L ft slightly off the ground preparing for the next step (ct &).

The dancers face centre and dance in place (a little backwards). They dance two walking steps in place: step on L ft crossing behind R ft (ct 1); bounce on L ft (ct &); step on R ft crossing behind L ft (ct 2); bounce on R ft (ct &). Three smaller faster steps: one back and two in LOD: L ft (ct 1) back, R ft (ct &), L ft (ct 2) forward—Weight on L ft, R ft slightly off the ground preparing for the next step (ct &).

All steps repeat until the music stops.

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<sup>19</sup> In Serbian for "Mile, pass through our region, so you can see what is heaven." [my translation].

<sup>20</sup> Right R; Left L.

<sup>21</sup> Right foot R ft; Left foot L ft.

<sup>22</sup> Count one.



**Figure 1**

*Kolo Šetnja, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 2020*



## Embarking on a Journey

I embarked on my doctoral journey longing for a greater understanding of what it means to learn holistically, and even further, what it means to be fully human. Inspired and guided by my belief in traditional cultural knowledge, I explore the ways to reclaim this seminal way of knowing. I believe that through cultural activities, specifically traditional songs and dances, we acquire the traditional knowledge necessary for being and becoming in the world. While dancing in kolo and holding hands, we learn how to carry this knowledge within ourselves and pass it to the next generation.

A motif that is central for this study, which carries Ancient Serbian/Slavic residual meaning of kolo, is the “kolovrat.” The kolovrat (spoked wheel) is a symbol of the supreme God “Rod” and its manifestations. Kolo means “wheel”, and its “vrat” (spokes) are spinning. It is a symbol of spirituality as well as secular powers, often representing a sun, star, water whirl, seasons, or an endless circle of birth and death. Sometimes the kolovrat is presented with eight points, sometimes with six, and sometimes with four<sup>23</sup> (see Figure 2).

### Figure 2

*Eight-Point Kolovrat, Six-Point Kolovrat, Four-Point Kolovrat*



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<sup>23</sup> I acknowledge the similarity of a four-point Kolovrat with the swastika symbol used by Nazi Germany. Sadly, because of Hitler’s Third Reich adoption and misappropriation, the ancient symbol became associated with World War II, military brutality, fascism, and genocide. I realize that seeing this image in this text might invoke negative thoughts and feelings in some of you, my readers. Thus, I ask you humbly, to try to look beyond what you may already know, and with that, help me reclaim and return the original connotation and importance of this ancient symbol.





The kolovrat as an ancient symbol is believed to have originated approximately 15,000 years ago. One of the first carvings was discovered on a figurine of a bird made from a mammoth's tusk.

The ancient engraving is hypothesized to have been used for fertility and health purposes, the pattern similar to one that is found naturally occurring on the mammoth—an animal that has been regarded as a symbol of fertility (Hogeback, 2020, para. 1)

The kolovrat's simple shape and its quality of perpetual movement offers additional significance to all five major aspects of this work: *re*-turning to my initial curiosity and inquiry, studying the *re*-emergent ideas, theories and paradigms, *re*-visioning my approach to the study, listening and *re*-listening to knowledge holders' stories, and *re*-constructing the findings through the teachings. To establish that connection visually, I use the kolovrat as a graphical representation, often in a slightly altered state.

*"We are all pilgrims in search of the unknown" (Coelho, 1982 in Arias, 2002, p. iii).*

I began this journey not knowing it would be my pilgrimage of becoming. Even then, intuitively, I recognized it would be more than what I initially anticipated. In the beginning, I identified the purpose of my inquiry to develop practice-based understandings for participation in cultural activities as a process for holistic development of a person within a community and its extension within societies. The specific focus of my study is the positioning of folkloric dance as a manifestation of holistic ways of being. In particular, exploring how cultural activities, specifically dance, also including visual arts, rituals, storytelling, and such, impact the people who are engaged in those activities. My goal was to attend to this study through four intertwining themes that represent distinct categories and as such could be observed separately from one another, and more importantly, not necessarily in a linear approach, but rather iteratively.

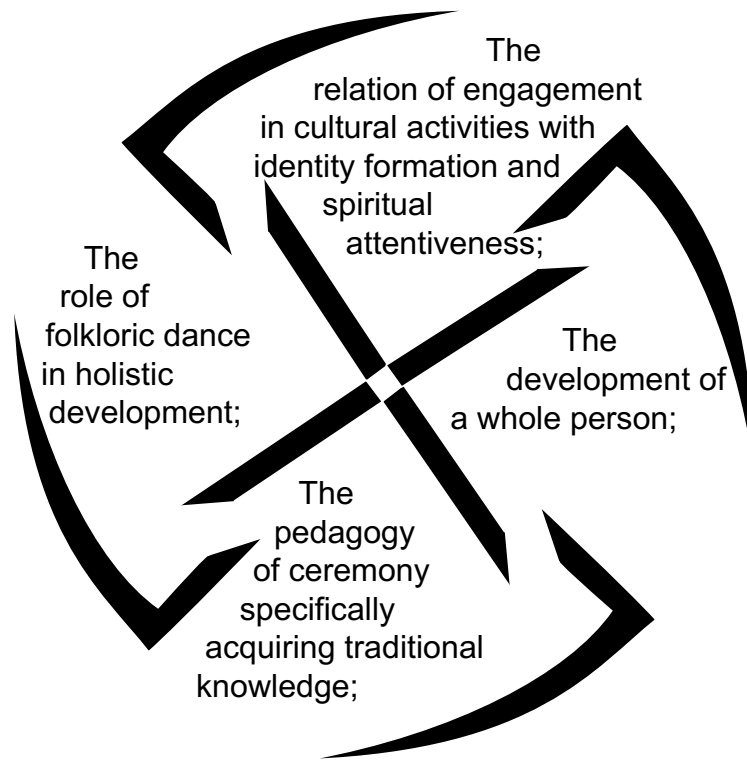
- the development of the whole person;
- the pedagogy of ceremony particularly acquiring traditional knowledge;
- the role of folkloric dance in holistic development; and
- the relation of engagement in cultural activities with identity formation and spiritual attentiveness.



As aforementioned, I rely on the kolovrat as a graphic representation for many concepts and ideas. In this case, to be able to demonstrate the constant revolving of the themes I use a four-point kolovrat and place each theme in the separate field. However, the partitioning of the themes visually hindered their interrelation, the concept on which I wanted to focus. Allowing permeability between distinct fields and constantly stimulating movement became the methodology that I employed throughout this study. Thus, to graphically represent this concept, I have slightly altered the kolovrat symbol by opening its solid cross lines, the idea recommended by my dear colleague, Kelly Robinson (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Four Main Intertwining Themes Kolovrat*



Continuing on this path, it became evident that in addition to the academic goal and intended contribution, this study morphed into a search for meaning—an inner journey. It became an opportunity to discover new values, reclaim and deepen my own



Serbian sense of self, and through deepening spiritual attentiveness, encounter the world with fresh eyes.

I am not a shaman. Nor am I an elder, a pipe carrier, or a celebrated traditionalist. I am merely one who has trudged the same path many of this human family has—the path of the seeker, called forward by a yearning I have not always understood. (Wagamese, 2019, pp. 27-28)

My pilgrimage became a mental (academic) and physical (through the practice of dance) effort—search for the sacred, a place where spiritual experience and geography or land-based pedagogy converge. The pilgrimage road, the mental, spiritual, and physical journey, arduous at times, was laid by abundant teachings and surrounded by medicine on all sides.

Art, ritual and trance inquiry invite an interrelational entrance into fascinating liminal spaces of knowing, not knowing and being. When the entrance is related to a place, geologically and sacredly, the voice of the Earth can emerge and “inmerge” with the inquirer. (Bickel, 2020, p. 55)

Reclaiming my liminality, I found myself at the open road with the unwritten signposts. I was free to wander the unknown landscapes and learn “to improvise a movement along a way of life” (Ingold, 2010). While my main focus remained folkloric dance, I intuitively knew that my pilgrimage would reveal much more. To embark on a journey, I selected one, while composed of many aspects, guiding research question to lead my way:

*How do cultural activities, specifically folkloric dance, advance holistic learning and influence the development of the whole person?*

This research question emerges from my personal and professional experience, combining ethnographic self<sup>24</sup> with my broader interdisciplinary perspective, my passionate involvement with the Serbian and Balkan communities, and my engagement with scholarship—on holistic education, dance, cultural, and community studies. Even though the beginning of this research is centered on the holistic *education* literature typically focused on institutional practices and curriculum processes, my aim is to emphasize holistic *learning* as a learning journey and development of the person itself.

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<sup>24</sup> As proposed by Coffey (1999), to be “un-divorced” from self when conducting, recording, and later writing about my ethnographic field work.



Avoiding to clearly distinguish the two terms, I use holistic education and holistic learning (almost) interchangeably. Additionally, an important aspect that is orienting this work as well: while this study is based on the teachings of holism, and culture within community, the fundamental orientation is informed by Indigegogy<sup>25</sup>, or Indigenous teachings centered on land-based education to which I profoundly relate. I recognize that I and many others “have been severed from our roots and forgotten the deep sense of relation with our Ancestors, the planet, and the cosmos, that have characterized human experience for millennia” (Baker & Baker, 2010, p. 98), I also “would like to believe that our connection to our roots is merely dormant and, if given the opportunity, we can revive it once again” (Davidson & Davidson, 2016, p. 5).

Yearning to understand relation with my Ancestors<sup>26</sup>, I sought wisdom in Ancestors from another world, whom I encountered on this continent. At the beginning, I did not understand this connection—I felt it but did not know it. I carried this allusion so deep in my being that I was unable to articulate it. Over time and with every new teaching, this connection manifested stronger and as a mountaineering rope led me through the unknown and sometimes misty landscapes. The landscapes, as I learned later, I mythopoetically understood<sup>27</sup>, deepening my spiritual attentiveness. I was safely tied in the middle between two worlds, able to learn, for me, new knowledge systems, ways of being, ways of methodologies for knowing and with that knowledge, reclaim the one from which I originated and then share it forward. My work is interwoven with golden threads that represent my attunement to the Indigenous land-based pedagogy and each thread reveals my deep relation and gratitude for the teachings. I learn from my mentor and,

When I use the word Indigenous (or indigeneity), I am acknowledging what the elders acknowledge: that we are all indigenous to earth... Each of us is endogenous or indigenous to the place(s) we come from, and if we create curricula and practices that explore the pedagogy of place and the

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<sup>25</sup> Indigegogy is a term coined by Stan Wilson, a Cree Elder and Educator.

<sup>26</sup> See My Arrival to This Study section.

<sup>27</sup> Understanding I am not at this level, I am striving toward spiritual ways Wagamese (2019) illustrated sharing the story about Beginnings: “As they sat and talked with the boy, who was now a grown man, the Grandfathers were touched by his earnest respect for everything he had learned. He held the Teachings in his heart and he allow the Great Mystery of things to remain a mystery, merely offering tremendous respect for it all and not allowing himself to reason it away, alter it or reshape it to his thinking” (p. 40).



pedagogy of the imagination, we can—through the capacity of many-eyed seeing—learn to celebrate the diversity among us. (Kelly, 2013, p. 18)

I position myself as Tanaka (2015) and I know that “[b]y many definitions I am not Indigenous, yet I am becoming indigenist. I feel a direct call to engage in indigenous modes of inquiry” (p. 66). Kimmerer’s book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) encourages me to straighten my back and stand my height. In the gracious and benevolent words, Kimmerer (2013) shared the Original Instructions, an origin story, about Skywoman, an immigrant to this world as well, which further focuses my lens:

[W]hen Skywoman arrived here, she did not come alone. She was pregnant. Knowing her grandchildren would inherit the world she left behind, she did not work for flourishing in her time only. It was through her actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant became indigenous. For all of us, becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children’s future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it. (p. 9)

Learning about Indigenous ways of living, I have uncovered knowledge—a code by which I am made endogenous to my place and origins:

I carry my Mama<sup>28</sup> on my skin and my Tata<sup>29</sup> in my bones

I receive with my left hand and I give with my right.

In kolo.

I present this dissertation as a braided text, to what I refer as a *métissage* (Hasebe-Lund, et. al., 2009), which I also use as a research methodology that allows me to incorporate my writing with other voices “in such a way that highlights difference (racial, cultural, historical, socio-political, and linguistic) without essentializing or erasing it” (Chambers et al., 2008, 142). This work is arranged in five sections and I refer to them as kolos. Each section or kolo begins as a continuation of the story “Igranka” with which I began this section as well. “Igranka” describes the event that inspired this inquiry, it also best depicts the five primary elements of this research:

- physical setting,
- researcher’s perspective,

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<sup>28</sup> In Serbian for Mom.

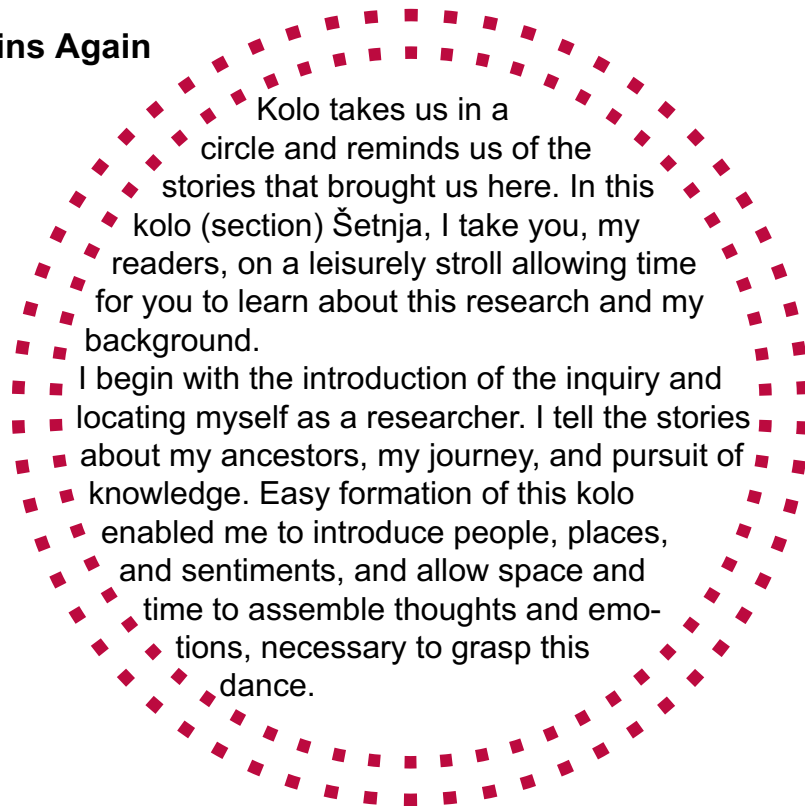
<sup>29</sup> In Serbian for Dad.



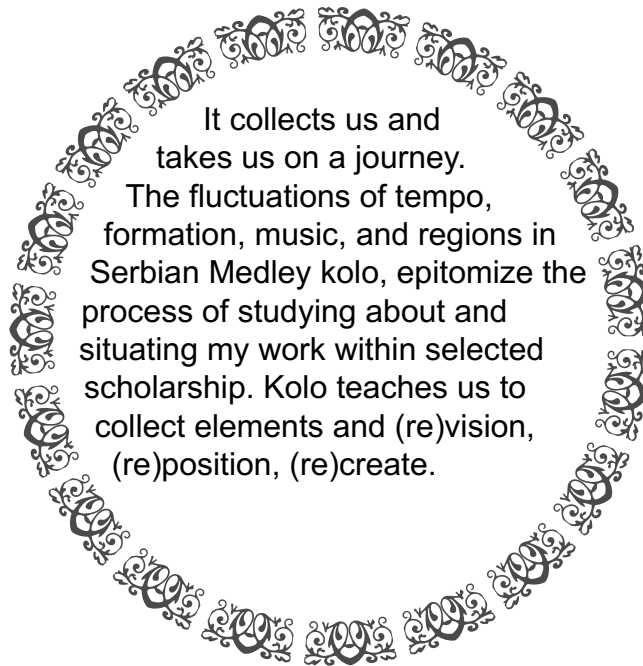
- culture and ideology,
- central metaphors and symbols, and
- participants' role in shaping and defining that context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997).

As I was writing, I noticed that each section has a different rhythm and I approach it with different energy, thoughts, and devotions. I attended to each section as I would step into kolo—anxious and excited for the unknown, but with anticipated joy. Thus, I connect each section with a depiction of kolo that best relates to its topic, purpose, form, and rhythm. The description of kolos (the circles below) represent a basic roadmap of the landscapes, to help orient us on the journey we are travelling together. To help understand the selected kolos better, at the beginning of each section and after the story of Igranka, I have also included the notations, movement patterns, and my illustrations depicting people dancing, dressed in the traditional clothing of the regions from which these kolos originated.

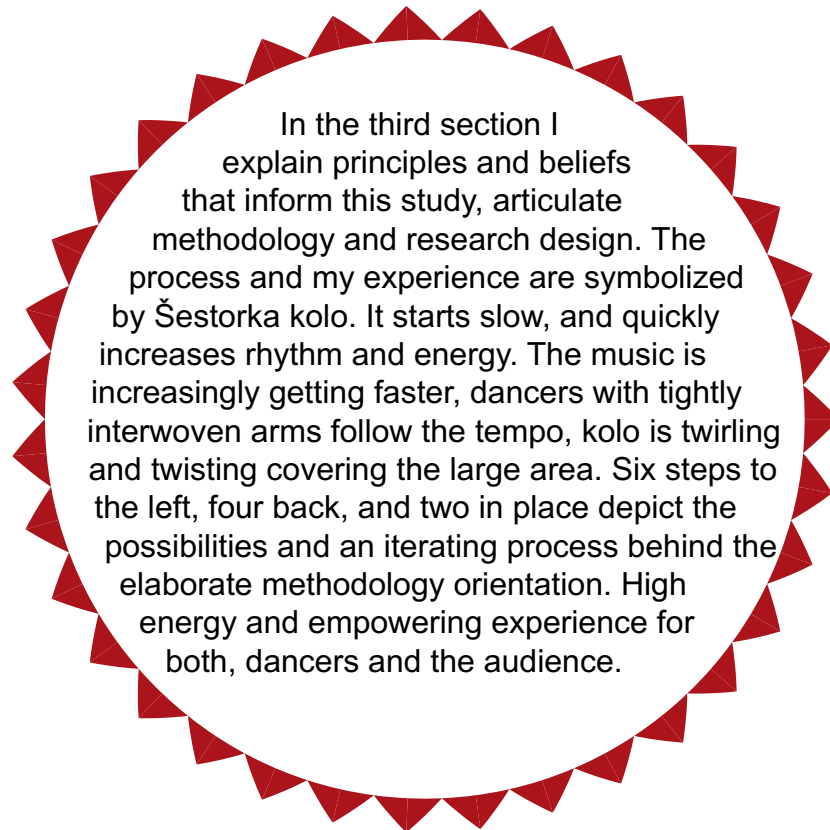
### Kolo Ends and Begins Again



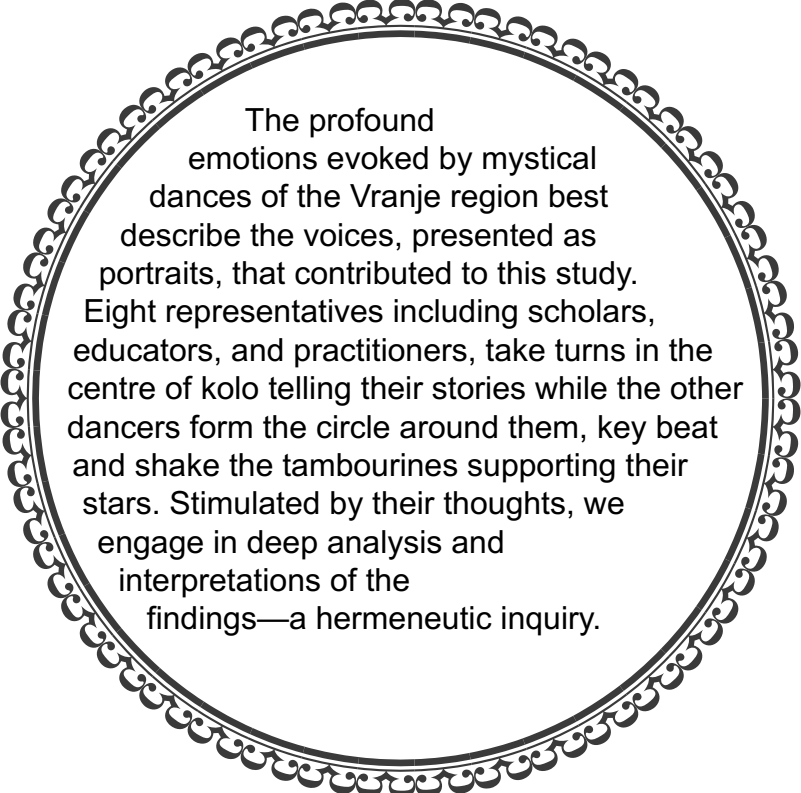
## Kolo Collects



## Kolo Rejoices

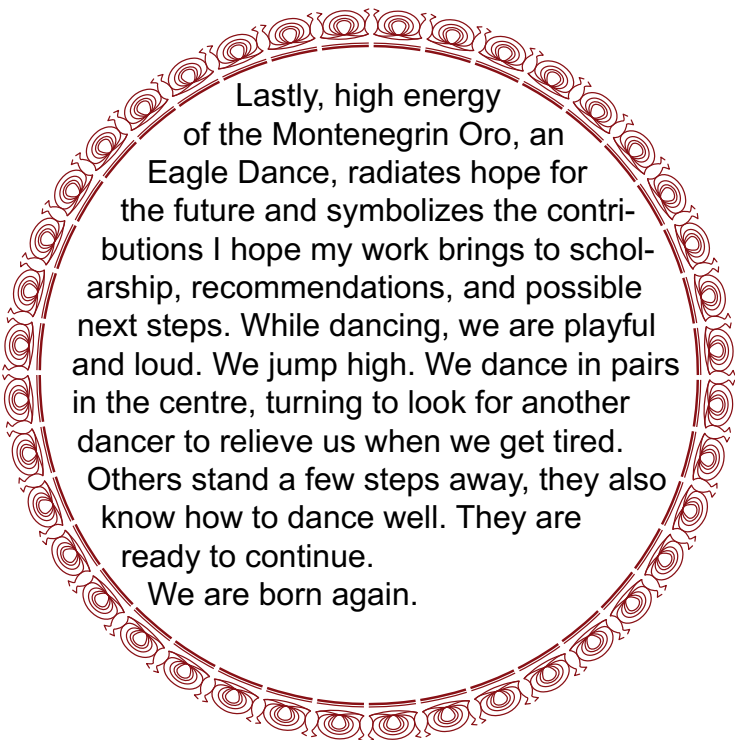


## Kolo Listens and Holds the Stories



The profound emotions evoked by mystical dances of the Vranje region best describe the voices, presented as portraits, that contributed to this study. Eight representatives including scholars, educators, and practitioners, take turns in the centre of kolo telling their stories while the other dancers form the circle around them, key beat and shake the tambourines supporting their stars. Stimulated by their thoughts, we engage in deep analysis and interpretations of the findings—a hermeneutic inquiry.

## Kolo Births Us



Lastly, high energy of the Montenegrin Oro, an Eagle Dance, radiates hope for the future and symbolizes the contributions I hope my work brings to scholarship, recommendations, and possible next steps. While dancing, we are playful and loud. We jump high. We dance in pairs in the centre, turning to look for another dancer to relieve us when we get tired. Others stand a few steps away, they also know how to dance well. They are ready to continue. We are born again.





“Within each of us is a shaman. Within each of us is a teacher. Within each of us is a storyteller. There are powerful roles that are vital to our collective survival.”  
(Wagamese, 2019, p. 104)

## My Inquiry

In many aspects, this dissertation’s central theme is the journey of broader recognition of different ways of being human and reawakening to an appreciation of knowledge systems and their right to integrity, sovereignty, and permission for their enactments to be useful beyond their boundaries. If we are able to accomplish that, we will be able to imagine ways of practice that are addressing the environmental, cultural, social, specifically educational diseases of our time.

Given the ever-growing awareness of an ecological crisis, a crisis in human relations, as well as a spiritual crisis within our societies, I am convinced that Indigenous Knowledges, values, and ethical teachings, regarding the need for acknowledging our respectful reciprocal relationship with all of Creation, are more relevant than ever. (Kelly, 2021a, p. 186)

If we agree to leave the familiarity of our comfortable cultural viewpoints, we will find ourselves undertaking different perspectives and then witnessing unexpected outcomes and transformations. For example, in the book *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*, Harari (2014) observed that early humans were able to share stories which allowed them to collaborate in large numbers in flexible ways. Since these shared stories are not genetically based, humans are able to adapt and change their behavior as soon as they adapt to their new beliefs. Harari continued with his view on the development of cultures. He claimed that “[h]uman cultures are in constant flux... Over the millennia, small, simple cultures gradually coalesce into bigger and more complex civilizations, so that the world contains fewer and fewer mega-cultures, each of which is bigger and more complex” (p. 184). While he acknowledged the creation of mega-cultures and that human history is moving towards unity, he also elaborated on an important statement that,

*The single global culture is not homogeneous. Just as a single organic body contains many different kinds of organs and cells, so our single global culture contains many different types of lifestyles and people, from New York stockbrokers to Afghan shepherds. Yet they are all closely connected and they influence one another in myriad ways. [emphasis added] (p. 187)*



In my years as an educator, I have noticed my students were not being their holistic selves. I have witnessed a rapid increase in their dependence on excessive technology, as a means to fill the gap created by a lack of ability to express artistically, and think critically and analytically. My concern for them and my own children, really all of us and the future generations, was growing. Interested in this phenomenon, I started to search to understand more deeply what is the nature of our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional connection to art? And what happens to us and within us when we engage in art practices and processes (Maljković, 2017).

In the following four short sections I introduce my inquiry (experiencing art, education, community, and methodology) and discuss these topics in detail in the later sections.

## **The Experience of Art**

To a great extent, the experience of art spreads beyond personal involvement and it penetrates all other components of society—its culture(s), economy, socio-politics, and major institutions for health, education, and such. Dewey (1934) warned us that by separating art from larger societal involvement and by reducing its immersion within community life by placing it into museums and galleries, we are “driving away esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness” (p. 9). When discussing art, we often refer to the artistic processes which involve emotions and inspirations that we expect our students, and generally youth, to implement it in their practice. However, often youth develop their social and cultural skills drawing from popular sources which educators cannot influence such as tent-pole movies, video games, or other popular social media. Decades before the appearance of Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and other social mediums that nowadays shape our lives directly or indirectly, Greene (1997) warned that “television shows have replaced such common cultural holdings: ‘David Letterman,’ ‘The Today Show,’ and ‘Saturday Night Live’ shape the culture’s conversation, and the ‘deepest levels of life’ are rolled over or ignored” (p. 9). Her observation reverberates into the present day, and stands as a timely reminder of the current state and its impact on future generations. With that I recognize the necessity to look beyond the closest and immediate goal of creating art and inducing emotions. Instead, as an artist and educator, I sought to deeply understand the complexity of the



situation and my role in (re)discovering 'paths to living what matters' (Nepo, 2020). I asked how to begin to (re)imagine and (re)vision my reality?

In the book *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony*, Sara Florence Davidson co-authored with her father Robert Davidson, a renowned Haida artist, describing his motivation to carve his first totem pole explained, “[f]rom his perspective, the role of the artist is to ‘fill the void.’ My father described ‘the void’ as the gaps in our knowledge or our practice” (Davidson & Davidson, 2018, p.35). Bickel’s (2020) words further Davidson’s explanation for me: “Through the making and re-making of culture, artists can bring awareness to these marginalized experiences through a novel aesthetic and ethical lens and assist society to face grief and understand itself” (p. 78).

Observing the importance of art from the different cultural world, Greene (1997) illustrated the possibilities: “Imagination, after all, allows people to think of things as if they could be otherwise; it is the capacity that allows a looking through the window of the actual toward alternative realities” (p. 2). Imagination as a spark that lights a fuse, as a driving force. Benson (2001) believed that:

Our involvement in aesthetic experiences of art is one of active participation. Learning how to participate includes acquiring cognitive skills of reading and symbol-manipulation, social skills of making-believe, empathizing, caring, and critical skills of comparing and judging. A major developmental feature of the ability to participate in and to benefit from the arts, as forms of cultural meaning, is the associated phenomenology of feeling. (p. 187)

Benson continued explaining that even though aesthetic experiences of art and generally positive absorption<sup>30</sup> phases are often temporary and brief, they have long-lasting outcomes. The phenomenon of “expansion of self” during these experiences allows one to expand to another dimension, and when the experience ends, it never fully goes back to the previous state. Benson further affirmed that “the concept of art is open to unbounded change in its technologies, and in its capacities to shape and require new forms of psychological participation and experience” (p. 193). He added that “forms of art and forms of consciousness constitute each other,” yet when people describe their aesthetic experiences they report “a blurring of the boundaries of self” (p. 193) or of the controlling element of self, namely the personal pronoun “I.” This phenomenon can be

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<sup>30</sup> See the Visual Art: Painting [My New] Life section.



explained by the idea of consciously relocating to another space/place where this art form exists, such as a role for a performing artist or a land/cityscape for a painter. In this process, artists are stopping the urge to allow their own predispositions by not deploying their “I” and/or are not responding to the conditions that require the deployment of their “I”. Instead, they are experiencing positive absorption, a process generally rich with prospects for the expansion of self, potentially better understanding of *self* as artists. I recognize that these processes might be practiced in arts classrooms, however I am interested in expanding the boundaries of the school walls and reaching beyond. I am interested in exploring ways to ensure “long-lasting outcomes” (Benson, 2001, p. 193) in both youth and adults—offering how to (re)connect to their inner selves, develop, or deepen their spiritual attentiveness, and aim for the wholeness of their humanness.

While I trust that imagining is the beginning of our active participation, I am learning that imagination is also,

understood to be a quality of mind in settler culture. In Haudenosaunee/Mohawk tradition, the same quality is understood to be animal and spiritual helpers manifesting their presence in one’s life. That sacred ecology of mind is a consequence of long residence in traditional territory and enduring spiritual and intellectual relationships between people, clans, and landscape (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 365)

With this new understanding of imagination, I am learning to be cognizant of my own privilege to imagine, which also brings a profound responsibility. I am unravelling the tapestry of my knowledge, unlearning while searching for the common beginning. I am also learning that “humility is the foundation of everything” (Wagamese, 2019, p. 38) and “[u]nderstood as a blessing, imagination is the ongoing invitation to give thanks at remaining part of Creation’s bestowal of belonging” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 370).

## **Education as Survival**

As I progressed further in my quest it became evident that the solution could not be found within conventional mainstream educational approaches. Greene (1997) cautioned us: “There is too much of a temptation otherwise to concentrate on training rather than teaching, to focus on skills for the workplace rather than any ‘possible



happiness' or any real consciousness of self" (p. 3). Similarly, Rachel Naomi Remen (1999), a medical doctor and an educator held the position that,

Medical education is not an education at all: it is a training. An education evokes wholeness and attends to integrity, while a training specializes, focuses, and narrow us. And in specializing, we disavow parts of wholeness. We sacrifice our wholeness for expertise. (p. 36)

While this tension between education and training is not the main focus of my inquiry, it deserves engagement as it is vital for the deeper meaning of learning. Another reminder that we must step back and engage in a larger picture is rereading a letter written to the College of William & Mary in Virginia by the Chiefs of the Iroquois League of Nations, or Six Nations in 1744:

Sirs,

We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in Colleges, and that the Maintenance of our young Men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinc'd, therefore, that you mean to do us Good by your Proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different Nations have different Conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our Ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same with yours.

We have had some Experience of it. Several of our Young People were formerly brought up at the College of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your Sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods, unable to bear either Cold or Hunger; knew neither how to build a Cabin or take a Deer; or kill an Enemy, spoke our Language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Counsellors; they were totally good for nothing.

We are, however, not the less oblig'd by your kind Offer; tho' we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons, we will take care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them. (as cited in Carroll, 1999, p. 240)

Reading and writing about this topic inspired me to investigate my own family's educational patterns in the past four generations: my Baba<sup>31</sup>, my Mama, myself, and my daughters.

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<sup>31</sup> In Serbian for Grandmother.



My maternal Baba Angelia was born at the turn of the 20th century in the rural parts of former Yugoslavia. She lived on the land—cultivating the soil, keeping animals, and like the rest of her village, making a decent living for her family as did her Ancestors before her. Due to the beginning of WWI, she did not attend school and remained barely literate for the rest of her life. On the other hand, she acquired knowledge through her involvement with the community, her family, and the rest of the village. She learned from her elders, gray heads<sup>32</sup>, as knowledge holders. The knowledge she needed and used to exist in the world originated from her community through life and work. She remained close to her Ancestral values and believes, and her spiritual attentiveness persisted, helping her survive two world wars and raise her family as a young widow. All her six children thrived and led full lives. As a child, I vaguely remember listening to some of Baba Angelia’s stories about the wild animals (basne). I remember being amazed by the stories where animals were given human characteristics and they were engaged in regular human practices. Unfortunately, I do not remember the details and as Chambers, I have too,

grieved for the stories I was told but never heard, for the stories I heard but didn’t remember, for the stories I wanted but never ask for. I regretted speaking when I should have been listening... I prayed that someday I would learn the wisdom that “sits in these places” (Basso, 1996), and learn to hear the voices that these places speak. That someday I would learn to “come home through stories” (McLeod, 1998). (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 143)

Many years later I have read the story about a bear, a boar, and a fox cultivating the land, and this reminded me of one of my Baba Angelia’s stories. I now share with you the version collected by philologist and linguist Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (2017), instead of the one from my childhood, however both versions originated from Serbian people. There are many other stories that were created by and for the Serbian people as a way of passing on knowledge about our ways of being.

### ***The Bear, the Pig, and the Fox***

*The bear, the pig, and the fox came together, and agreed to plow the land and sow the wheat so they could feed themselves. They asked each other what they would offer to do and how they would find the seeds.*

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<sup>32</sup> Gray haired men and women known as knowledge holders.



*The pig said, "I will break the wheat silo, and steal the seed; I will plow with my trunk."*

*The bear said, "I will sow."*

*And the fox said, "I will harrow with my tail."*

*They plowed, sowed. The harvest was coming. They began to talk about how they would reap. The pig said, "I will reap."*

*The bear said, "I will sheaf and bound."*

*The fox said, "I'll collect the ears of wheat."*

*They reaped and sheafed and bound. Now they began to agree on how they will thresh the wheat.*

*The pig said, "I'll set the threshing place."*

*The bear said, "I will bring the sheaf, and I will thresh."*

*The pig said, "I'll separate the grains from the ears and stalks."*

*The fox said, "I'll loosen the chaff from the grain with my tail."*

*The pig said, "I'll winnow with a winnowing fan."*

*And the bear said, "I will divide the grain."*

*They threshed. The bear divided the grain; but he did not divide it right: for the pig begged, and the bear gave her straw only, and he took all the wheat himself, and gave nothing to the fox. The fox got angry, so she went to complain and told them that she would bring an imperial man who would distribute the grain right. The pig and the bear got scared, so the bear said to the pig: "Bury yourself in the straw, and I will climb on this pear tree." The pig buried itself in the straw, and the bear climbed the pear tree. The fox went and found the cat, and invited her to go for a walk and to go to the threshing place to catch mice. The cat knew that there was a lot of mice at the threshing place, so she gladly went, and was running left of the road, and right of the road, chasing birds.*

*The bear saw them from a pear tree, and said to the pig: "Big trouble pig! Here comes the fox bringing a terrible consul: he is dressed in the weasel coat, and is even catching the birds around the road." At that, the cat disappears from the bear's vision, and through the high grass came to the threshing place, and looking for the mice started rustling the straw. The pig rose its head to see what is happening, and the cat thought from its trunk that it is a mouse, so it jumped on the pig and stroked it on the nose with its paws. The pig got scared and shook his head and jumped and hopped into the stream; and the cat got startled by the pig and climbed the pear tree; and the bear thought that she had already drowned the pig, so*



*now she is going after him, and out of fear fell from the pear tree to the ground and broke and died, leaving all the wheat grain and straw to the fox.*<sup>33</sup>

My Mama Marija attended primary school at her village and upon completing it, moved to the neighbouring city to continue her education. Through this process she became similar to the young Iroquois men, since she too became “totally good for nothing” for the community of her village. Her two brothers split their parents’ land while she and her other three sisters moved on. Some of them married into the neighbouring villages and my Mama moved to the capital city where she continued with her post-secondary education and later worked. Even though she visited her village regularly, over time she became increasingly separated from the spirituality of that place and by the time I was born, she converted from a once “local” into a “visitor” to a place where she was born and raised. However, she deeply understood the importance and the pedagogy of the land, so she insisted we visit often, even at times when travelling across the country was a luxury for our financially struggling family. With that, she has hopes

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<sup>33</sup> “Medjed, svinja i lisica.

Udruže se medjed, i svinja i lisica, pa se dogovore da oru zemlju i da siju šenicu da se hrane. Zapitaju jedno drugoga šta će koje raditi i kako će sjeme naći. Svinja reče: “Ja cu provaliti koš, magaza, i ukrašču sjeme; Ja ću svojom surlom uzorati.” Medjed reče: “Ja ću posijati.”

A lisica reče: “Ja ću svojim repom podrljati.” Uzoraše, posijaše.

Dodje žetva. Staše se razgovarati kako će požeti. Svinja reče: “Ja ću žeti.” Medjed reče: “Ja ću snoplje vezati.” Lisica reče: “Ja ću klasje kupiti.”

Požeše i snoplje povezaše. Sada se staše dogovarati kako će vršidbu uraditi. Svinja reče: “Ja cu gumno načiniti.” Medjed reče: “Ja ću snoplje snijeti, i ja cu vršiti.” Svinja reče: “Ja cu pretresati i rastaviću slamu od šenice.” Lisica reče: “Ja ću svojim repom trniti pljevu sa šenice.”

Svinja reče: “Ja ću ovijati.” A medjed reče: “Ja ću žito razdijeliti.”

Ovrhoše. Medjed žito podijeli; ali ga ne podijeli pravo: jer ga svinja zamoli, te joj dade samo slamu, a šenicu svu uze sam, a lisici ne dade ništa. Rasrdi se lisica, pa otidje na tužbu i kaza im da će im dovesti jednog carskog čoeaka koji će žito pravo razdijeliti. Uplaši se svinja i medjed, pa reče medjed svinji: “Zakopaj se ti u slamu, a ja ću se popeti na ovu krušku.” Zakopa se svinja u slamu, a medjed se pope na krušku. Lisica otidje te nadje mačku, pa je pozva u društvo da idu na gumno da hvataju miše. Znajući mačka da na gumnu ima dosta miša podje rado, pa sad iznad puta sad ispod puta trči za ticama.

Opazi je medjed s kruske poizdaleka, pa kaže svinji: “Zlo svinjo! Eto lisice dje vodi strašnoga bumbašira: ogrnuo ćurak od kune, pa i krilate tace hvata oko puta.” U tom se mačka ukrade medjedu iz očiju, pa kroz travu dodje na gumno, i tražeći miša stane šuškatati po slami. Svinja podigne glavu da vidi šta je, a mačka pomisli od njezine surle da je miš pa skoči te svinju šapama za nos. Svinja se uplaši pa rukne i skoči te nada u potok; a mačka se prepadne od svinje pa nada uz krušku; a medjed pomisli da je ona već svinju udavila, pa ide sad na njega, pa od straha padne sa kruške na zemlju te se razbije i crkne, a lisici ostane sve žito i slama.” [my translation] (Stefanović Karadžić, 2017, p. 204)





she will pass on, at least partially, the wealth of knowledge she received from her Ancestors. My Mama had a deeply spiritual relationship with nature, and often sought counsel from the trees. I learned from her that whenever I feel lost on my life journey, it is best to find my way to the nearest woods to restore and realign.

**Figure 4**

*Untitled, Mixed Digital Media, Maljković, 2015*



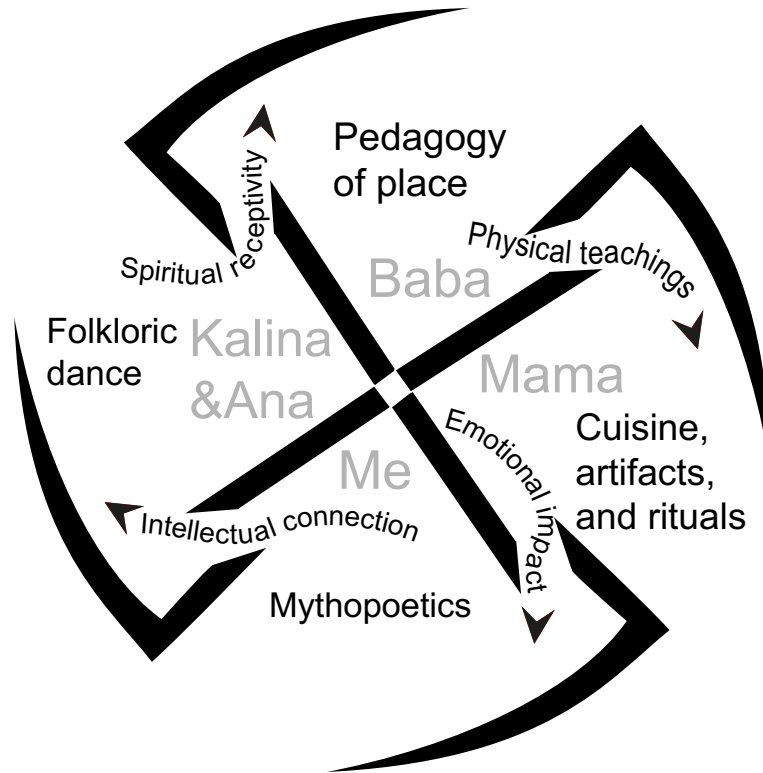
As a first generation born and raised away from my parents' immediate roots, my limited exposure to the spirituality of a place and my Ancestors' practices of passing traditional knowledge provided me with a solid foundation. It placed me in a position of imagination and curiosity. It allowed me to yearn for more and to pursue my own rediscovery of our ways of being. It also placed me in a position to carve a path for my daughters and the generations to follow. Even though we are 10,000 kilometers away from the place whose pedagogy I am trying to explain, I hope to leave them with enough



so they could live a fully human life. I employ kolovrat to illustrate our four generations' engagement and transfer of knowledge (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Four Generations Knowledge Engagement and Transfer Kolovrat*



My intention and my daughters' paths might not be simple, easy, or linear, but this is only the beginning.

In his book *Indigenous Community*, Cajete (2015) shared his educational experience that is similar to my own and as such, sets the context for my inquiry:

My memories of college include unending memorizations, competing for a grade, catering to the wants of the professor, studying subjects detached from experience, endless examinations, quoting ad infinitum the thought of others, learning about the world mediated through the eyes of others, and having discussions devoid of meaningful dialogue. These are common memories for many of us regarding our experience in college. A few students wonder if there should be more to education, something of deeper meaning, but most students don't question at all. The focus instead on the all-American line, "Get an education; get a job." (p. 6)



But education should be much more than a single-focused approach, such as the preparation for a job. In Serbian, my mother tongue, we use the term “prosveta,” which translated into English means enlightenment; thus, education should be the act of enlightening someone. Further, the Serbian word for *teaching* is “učiti,” and the base of the word *teach* is “uči” which means *learn*. The word for *teacher* has the same base as the word for *learner*: male/female *teacher* is učitelj/učiteljica, male/female *learner* is učenik/učenica, all derived from the same verb “učiti” or *learning*. Since my understanding of teaching and learning originated from these terms, I see a teacher building a vessel that carries a learner through a vast sea of knowledge at first and then they switch places. A teacher’s responsibility thus is not only to pass the knowledge to a learner, rather to ensure that the knowledge is received as intended. In that process, both a teacher and a learner are continuously assessing each other’s knowledge, engaged in a perpetual teaching-learning-teaching-learning cycle. Both are equally responsible for the knowledge they hold together. Both are building a vessel that carries them, and carries the knowledge as well.

In the book of essays *Education and the Education of Teachers*, Peters (1977), quoting Socrates offered that “anyone who is skilled in anything has regard for the standards which are constitutive of excellence in his art. He does not just know about them; he also cares about them and is committed to them” (p.9). Peters continued arguing that this idea of “sensitization to standards” is central to both theoretical and practical pursuit of knowledge and education. According to Peters, if a person is engaged in a theoretical pursuit, they need to begin from standards of clarity, relevance, consistency, and such, all are closely connected with theoretical knowledge. Practical pursuits also involve similar standards, at first beginning with established theoretical standards, and then including additional standards derived from the particular practice in which they are engaged. Therefore, being educated “involves a capacity for absorption and enjoyment which is connected with sensitization to standards which structure activities and pursuits (Peters, 1977, p. 9).

Regarding the Socratic concept of “knowledge of the good”<sup>34</sup> vital to understanding the non-instrumental aspect of “being educated” Peters observed that

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<sup>34</sup> Socrates relates self-knowledge to the knowledge of justice and the good. “[T]he ignorance of goodness, along with the ignorance of justice and beauty, would be slavish, and that thinking one



knowledge enters into the concept of being an educated person in three ways: viz. depth of knowledge or theoretical understanding, breadth of knowledge involved in all-round development and in 'cognitive perspective', and 'knowledge of the good.' (p. 9)

How knowledge or education is tightly connected to a good living and basic survival is best illustrated in Aluli Meyer's (2001) study with Hawaiian educators on the topic of the cultural context of knowledge: "Kamuela Kumukahi knows something when he can *feed his family*. It is the logical result of practice, observation, awareness, and morality. Feeding family becomes the place where practice dovetails with intelligence and compassion" [emphasis in original] (p. 136). While I recognize this still may be the case in some cultures nowadays, education should never be observed as an opportunity for the privileged. Education should offer the next generation of learners not only the type of education that will help them better understand the world in which they live, but also to thrive in a future world that nobody can predict how it will look. Potentially, the only way to address the issues that the uncertain future might bring us is to strive for human wholeness and the capacity to creatively adapt to any situation.

How we care for the knowledge we acquired and how we offer it to the new generations is instrumental for the existence of the human race. For example, Samset et al. (2020) reported that even if all greenhouse gas emissions would stop in 2020, the effects would not lessen global warming for many more decades. When a news article referenced their study, this topic grew in popularity among the "armchair activists," and while their posts saturated the social media, still not enough change was implemented in real life. This is a timely reminder that we must teach by example and offer more than words on paper or posts on the internet. If we do not, we will soon be facing this new generation of young people who are looking for different visions, who long to be permitted to have different thoughts of what it means to be human. In a time where we have difficulties with both our human and non-human relations and we face environmental crises, we should offer an educational system that honours various ways

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does know what one does not know would be a failure of self-knowledge" (Moore, 2015, p. 232). On the other hand, one of Socrates' critics, Hippias of Elis argued that "the good has no fixed or stable essence, but rather is fickle and changeable according to the diverse dispositions of human beings and the different relationships between the things that they desire" (Luzzatto et al., 2019, p. 465).



of understanding and ways of being, such that we will be directing them to paths where they can find the answers for themselves. Ingold (2013) reminded us that

[f]or stories do not, as a rule, come with their meanings already attached, nor do they mean the same for different people. What they mean is something that listeners have to discover for themselves, by placing them in the context of their own life histories. Indeed it may not be until long after a story is told that its meaning is revealed, when you find yourself retracing the very same path that the story relates. (p. 304)

Davidson (Davidson & Davidson, 2018) further clarified,

In my father's stories about *sk'ad'a*, our spiritual beliefs did not exist separately from the transmission of knowledge. Instead they were embedded throughout the stories, forming a vital component of his traditional education. [emphasis in original] (p. 20)

The world in which my father grew up is different from the world that I know today. He explained to me that during his grandfather's time, the culture was lived and the knowledge was common. He emphasised that if the knowledge is not used, it gets lost. (p. 21)

Undeniably telling and writing stories is immensely important because sometimes that will be the only way to communicate our knowledge to the future generations. Because "to read is ... not just to listen, but to remember. If writing speaks, it does so with the voices of the past, which the reader hears as though he were present in their midst." (Ingold, 2007, p. 15). We can only hope that we will be able to provide the next generation with strong starting points.

## **Learning Within Community**

While we now recognize the consistent albeit slow transformation of the educational paradigm and witness intensely delivered discourses on directions of education, my concern with the current situation still does not subside. Thus, I search for a way to advance holistic learning and influence the development of a whole person, and with that, to accommodate a profoundly different way of understanding being human. Jack Miller, one of the holistic learning advocates, shared his view that "holistic education attempts to nurture the development of the whole person. This includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual" (2005, p. 2). While the main focus of holistic education is the development of a whole person, there is also a recognized need for the development of wholeness in the community. Ron Miller (2000)



advised that people need to relate to one another and nurture a sense of care. Communities need to be built and expected to function on values of equity, diversity, and inclusion, which are the essential ideas of a holistic approach. Further yet, developing holism in society would reinforce those values, which in turn, would circle back and educate new generations holistically. Gregory Cajete (2015) emphasized the importance of holistic communities:

Community is therefore, the primary setting for traditional Indigenous education. It is inherently holistic, since community engages the whole person. It provides the context in which the affective dimension of education unfolds—where emotions develop and are shaped and refined. Community is where learning and sharing knowledge happen. (p. 23)

Holistic education, transformational in its nature, is based on the foundation that each person should find an identity, meaning, and purpose in life while nurturing relationships within the community, society, and natural world. One way to nurture holistic learning is through community cultural practices and developing an embodied way of knowing<sup>35</sup>. This concept of the embodied way of knowing is key to my intended focus and direction of exploring cultural activities as a manifestation of a holistic way of being.

## **Kolo as Methodology**

As an artist, I am naturally inclined to employ my preferred forms of art to examine my chosen topic in different ways. Patricia Leavy (2008) in the book *Method meets art* proposed an excellent starting point:

Arts-based methods draw on literary writing, music, performance, dance, visual art, film and other mediums. Representational forms include but are not limited to short narratives, novels, experimental writing forms, poems, collages, paintings, drawings, performance scripts, theater performances, dances, documentaries, and songs (Leavy, 2008, p. 3).

While in many ways I use “the arts as a foundation for creating expressive forms that enlighten” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 9), I further my research focusing on Indigenous land-based inquiry drawing from Absolon, Aluli Meyer, Four Arrows, Battiste, Cajete, Davidson & Davidson, Donald, Hanson, Kelly, Kimmerer, King, Kovach, Longboat,

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<sup>35</sup> See Kolo Collect and The Reason We Dance section for the discussion of the term embodiment and it's all linguistic variations.



Sheridan, Simpson, Wagamese, Wilson<sup>36</sup>. I also engage with this study through a *métissage* and braiding text (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). I find comfort in following the steps of scholars who have engaged in similar methodologies and have contributed to the academy through their invaluable work. For example, while biography might sometimes still be perused as unfavourable (Weinberg, 2008), increasingly scholars such as Burke, Chambers, Donald, Hasebe-Ludt, Hurren, Kelly, Leggo, Lowan-Trudeau, Oberg, Sinner, Robinson to name a few, use *métissage* as an emergent method to approach research (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Chambers et al., 2008; Chambers et al., 2012; Donald, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Kelly, 2012; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017). Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) also advocated that “[a]utobiography and life writing are ‘organic’ genres in a state of perpetual flux, constantly transforming and interpenetrating the permeable borders around them” (p. 17). When I read Cynthia Chambers (2004) work, inviting her students to use “own life as a site of [our] inquiry” (p. 3), my heart gladdened. Only through life writing I was able to reach to the depths of my being and start to recognize knowledge of which I was unaware before.

I write in a trance: my eyes are vacant and I don't hear you when you call, when you ask me if I have read your paper, or what is for supper. In this trance I am free and yet it is this freedom that stops me from picking up the pen and spilling words onto the page. (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 70)

Lastly, but most important to my methodology is my commitment to practice. From the various methodologies I explored on my journey, I became aware that *kolo* is a methodology. Kelly (2021b) exemplified, encouraged, and enthused my engagement in practices, both local to this land and traditional to my origin. She respectfully and generously offered,

I have found pedagogical pathways through story and song, but also through traditional land practices and Indigenous making processes like gathering and preparing medicines, weaving, carving, drumming, and participating in ceremony. As I came to understand the nature of these participatory pedagogies, I offered them to students and invited them to find and take up their own practices to make and un-make themselves such that they become resonate beings attuned to the ecologies in which they live. They make drums, learn songs from the local Nations, learn to a/tune as they walk the land to receive the teachings from All Their Relations. They write their stories of learning and becoming within the creation of their *Métissage* (Hasebe-Ludt, 2009), weaving their life writings and their artistic

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<sup>36</sup> I am certain that this list is not complete as, unfortunately, I am not able to recall all from whom I learned.



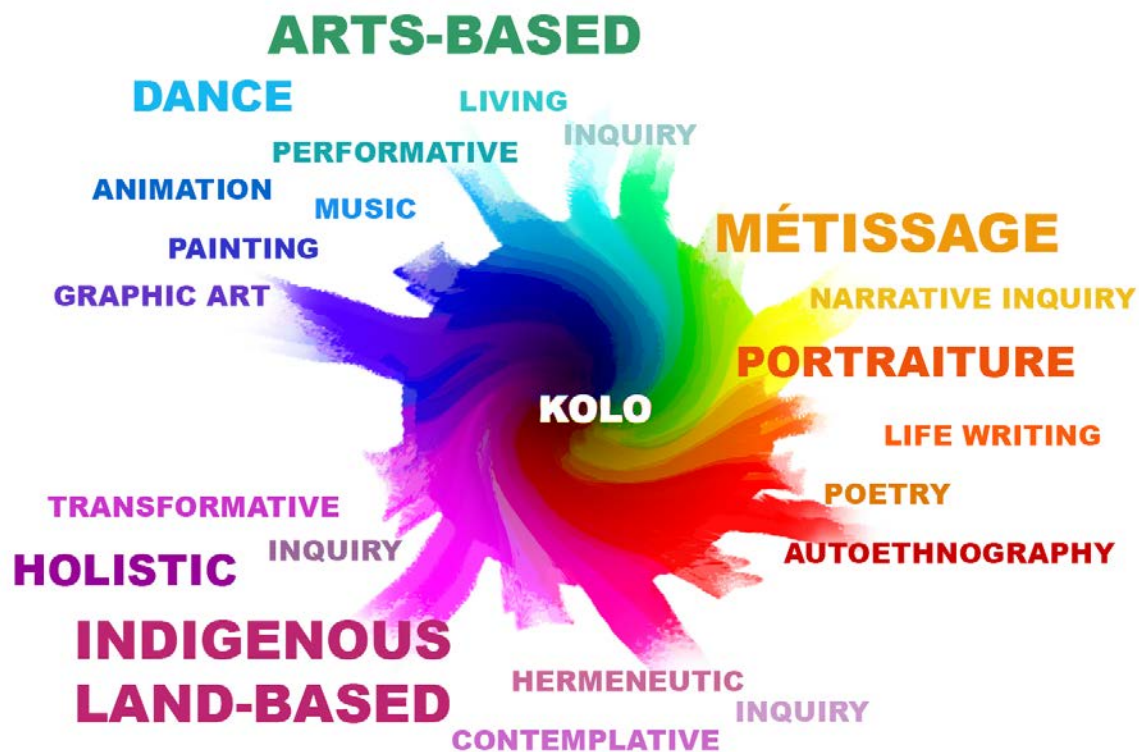
creations as they discover their own teachings within their *Dibaajimowinan*, personal stories, and find their own *Debwewin*, or truth to live by. They develop visions of a possible pathway to a good life or *Mino Bimaadizowin*. [emphasis in original] (p. 147)

I am “making and un-making” myself with every kolo.

The ways of my engagement in kolo as a methodology are best illustrated visually (see Figure 6). Each of these conduits represent my experience with different creative processes and artistic expressions. The importance of utilizing this approach derives from the desire to appropriately honour, observe, and understand this important topic holistically, responding to what I recognize is my duty while attuning to my individual affinity.

**Figure 6**

*Kolo as Methodology*



I also engage in other practices from the openings of the living curriculum on the dance floor and “I observe how I observe others” (Meyer, 2010, p. 87), over the discomfort of Transformative Inquiry (Freire, 1972; Tanaka et al., 2012), and an





openness to the unexpected of contemplative inquiry (Zajonc, 2009). I bring more queries to this section:

What if the research began long before we understood the question?

What if the research methodology is the question?

What if there is no unknown, just the unexplained or undocumented? What if we, like a master stone builder who already *knows* which stone to use, need to find a way to explain it<sup>37</sup>?

I trust that all methods of the study will come together to inform my inquiry. I too, wanted to “write in the way I danced; to feel each word as blood from ink, and let the words honour the rhythms and expressivity I so knew in my limbs” (Snowber, 2020, p. 418), while, undoubtedly, following a scholarly rigour. I saw an opening to recognize folkloric dance not only as an ethnochoreological, ethnomusicological, or performative entity, but also as a conduit for connecting traditional knowledge with contemporary educational processes, as an invitation to our acceptance of inclusive worldviews that practice different ways of being human.

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<sup>37</sup> I am watching a master stone builder at work. He is rebuilding an old Irish stone cottage. His materials are field-stones thrown up by centuries of ploughing and gathered to make ditches and walls. They are of all shapes and sizes and many colours, and were the building materials of the poor. His skills in using them well are highly sophisticated and require a subtle design sense. The walls are in fact double walls, the space between then filled with rubble. Each stone must be chosen according to the space left by the ones already set, by whether filling or capping is needed just here, and by the visual balance of mass as the pattern of the wall emerges. He works according to the plan of height and openings for doors and windows, but within the area of the wall itself each judgement is contingent on what is already there but also a creative judgement setting up succeeding contingencies.

Today the stones are randomly spread on the ground. He places them one at a time, flicks in a mortar, turns to survey what is on the ground, chooses a stone, twists and bends to pick it up, matches it to the space, rotates and positions it and mortars it in. Rarely does he reject a stone he has chosen. The space for the stone and the stone chosen are wedded easily by his visual perceptual and kinesthetic judgement. A new space opens up, a large stone is split with a sledgehammer, its inside is purple. When placed this can be seen to balance another purple stone already in place below to the left. A pleasing look emerges. And so it goes on (Benson, 2001, p. 32).



My extensive professional practice and lifelong learning experiences have been informing my multiple roles as an educator, researcher, and artist. Through this learning journey, I deepen my understanding, and upon completing this study, my aim is to contribute to the educational practice and learning of other holistic education practitioners. I share the story of liminality, becoming, and transformation. I record my critical personal reflections as I study holistic educational pedagogy and explore ceremonies, rituals, and other cultural traditions, specifically traditional folkloric dance, which I propose to be recognized as a manifestation of a holistic way of being. I also examine how participation in cultural activities advances identity formation and spiritual attentiveness. I carefully navigate the inherent tension between getting it right and moving quickly. I force myself to allow time to absorb this new knowledge, new way of learning and respect the process. I read, “She is thirteen, she will be fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. It takes time” (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 136) and I blush in the darkness of my room with only this page as the witness of my embarrassment for trying to move it too quickly. Elliot W. Eisner (2002) in the book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* wrote about the importance of time:

Another lesson that the arts can teach education is the importance of taking one’s time to relish the experience that one seeks. Experience is not so much something that you take; it is more like something you make. Experience, the medium of education, is a made progress, and it made by the ways in which people attend to aspects of the world they care about. If there is any lesson that the arts teach, it is the importance of paying close attention to what is at hand, of slowing down perception so that efficiency is put on a back burner and the quest for experience is made dominant. There is so much in life that pushes us toward the short term, toward the cursory, toward what is efficient and what can be handled in the briefest amount of time. The arts are about savoring. (p. 207)

I intend to explore my own living experiences and I hope they will provide insights and inform the pedagogical processes that can contribute to our greater understanding of our community and of holistic learning. My research goal is to profoundly understand the pedagogy of cultural traditions, and specifically folkloric dance as a researcher and educator, acknowledging that I already bring a significant amount of expertise and experience to this study as a community member and as a dancer. While educational researchers are debating on whether self-knowledge possesses epistemic security, I agree with Gertler’s (2012) argument that self-knowledge,



even if not absolutely certain, is especially secure, in the following sense: self-knowledge is immune from some types of error to which other kinds of empirical knowledge—most obviously, perceptual knowledge—are vulnerable. Some theorists who take this line maintain that there is a causal gap between a perceptual state and its object, and this gap introduces sources of error that are absent in direct introspective apprehension of a sensation. (para. 10)

Building on self-knowledge by deeply engaging in the practice of kolo as methodology (see Figure 6), I envision this study in three consecutive stages (see Figure 33 and Kolo Rejoices section):

- taking heed of the stories beginning with an engagement of the selected scholarship or the research stage;
- hermeneutically attending to the stories or the analysis and the synthesis stage; and
- telling and re-telling the stories or the discussion and dissemination stage,

all of which I will discuss later in the Research Design section. My professional view and vision bring uniqueness to this subject, as well as how I came to this research—where am I from, where am I now, my experiences, beliefs, struggles, and dreams are inspiring this study and informing my positionality. Thus, before I dive into the complexity of the research it is important to share my arrival story. As Chimamanda Adichie<sup>38</sup> said: “I’ve always felt it was impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person.”

## My Arrival to This Study

Imagine the slow notes of frula distantly rolling across the grassy hills. Take my hand and I will take you on a journey to a place and time that instigated my imagination and longing for this work. I will tell you stories and attend to both your interests and my needs<sup>39</sup>, as Snowber (2020) reminded us that, “autobiography is an architecture of self,

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<sup>38</sup> See “The danger of a single story” TEDGlobal 2009.

<sup>39</sup> According to Daignault (2005) we can distinguish four main modalities of autobiography: therapeutic through developing self-confidence for both the author and readers (and recognizing its healing properties by addressing shame, pain, guilt etc), literary emphasis by contributing to the body of work, objective emphasis by creating new empirical data for future research, and



a self we create and embody as we read, write, speak, and listen. The self becomes flesh in the world” (Pinar, 1994, as cited in Snowber, 2020, p. 417).

I was born in a land of peasants in the mountainous Balkans (“u nekoj zemlji seljaka na brdovitom Balkanu,” Maksimović, 1941) shaped by *košava*, a bad-tempered, squally wind that runs off the Carpathians and follows the Danube River sweeping everything in front of it. My distant Ancestors have been roaming those lands long before times changed. They respected the deities of nature and lived in harmony with it. Approaching adulthood, I left my homeland in hope to find something I had yet to imagine. I disembarked on the Canadian Pacific coast where, although uninvited, my adoptive people welcomed me to settle on the unceded traditional lands of Coast Salish peoples. I have been gifted with the opportunity to *become* here, to find Face (identity), Heart (soul, creative self, true passion), and Foundation (true work, vocation) (Cajete, 1994; Kelly, 2010), and to explore an inquiry that has been tugging me on a sleeve (Fels, 2012).

Both the land of my youth and the land my adulthood had deeply influenced who I am today and how I exist in the world. They represent “revered living and breathing places or being-ness” (p. 1), as Kelly (2015) so vibrantly portrayed: “Land-scapes or city-scapes have formed us all. It has formed our sensibilities and left delicate tracings within our imagination and created a deeply intrinsic disposition of the person we gradually become” (Kelly, 2015, p. 10). My deep connection to the lands of my Ancestors and my Descendants is encouraging me to be responsible to that part of self—my identity and personal history.

In this dissertation, you will find my work woven as a braid from three strands: a scholarly body of knowledge that informs me, my experience as an artist, educator, and researcher, and insights I collected from the people that accompanied me on this journey— “an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. x). Thomas King (2003) teaches us that “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2), and we must select the right ones to share. I tell a story of my Ancestors, relating to the people and land that conceived me and made me who I am today. I also tell my personal

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acousmatic by creating opportunities to listen to the intimate stories without seeing (knowing) the author. I will refer to the last modality later in text.



story of “discovering one’s true [F]ace (character, potential, identity), one’s [H]eart (soul, creative self, true passion), and one’s [F]oundation (true work, vocation), all of which lead to expression of a complete life” (Cajete, 1994, p. 23) I am eager to find.

This work is about vision  
and re-vision,  
exploration of art forms as experience,  
opportunities we have, and  
new openings we imagine.

## **The Land of My Ancestors**

The former Republic of Yugoslavia is nowadays composed of six different countries, two of them I call mine: the Republic of Montenegro, where I was born, and the Republic of Serbia, where I grew up. The capital of Serbia is Belgrade, which is not my birthplace—Podgorica is. Belgrade is not my parents’ birthplace, nor the city where I got married, or had my children. Nevertheless, I have deep connections to that place, and I consider it home. It is the place where I started to recognize and accept my character, potential, identity—to mould my Face (Cajete, 1994; Kelly, 2010), my first new beginning. I will always return to it.

Originated from Danube civilisations Lepenski Vir and Vinča, Ancient Serbs are indigenous to our land. Genetically, we belong to the oldest haplogroup in Europe which is traced back to the Paleolithic age (Кљосов, 2013; Regueiro et al, 2012). What is central Serbia today was always an important geo-strategical area, and was frequently intruded by other tribes in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. The confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers region (today’s Belgrade) became occupied by large-scale Slavic settlement in the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that indigenous Ancient Serb population mixed with the populous Slavs, who began separating Ancient Serbs from their cultural traditions. Later, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Christianization of the Serbian lands began, and the Serbian Principality became accounted Christian as of 870, when the Eparchy of Ras and Braničevo were established. Christianity was declared as the state religion by Prince Mutimir who reigned from 850 to 891, which further disconnected Ancient Serbs from their original sociocultural heritage.



**Figure 7**

*Defragmentation, Oil on Canvas, Maljković, 2016*



My parents always declared themselves as Yugo<sup>40</sup> Slavs, promoting brotherhood and the unity of the South Slavic peoples. According to Jovan Cvijić (1918), one of the most reputable Serbian scientists, human geographer, ethnographer, and sociologist, Southern Slavic peoples are divided into three different groups or characteristic types: the Dinaric, the Macedonian, and the Pannonic types. My close and extended family mainly belong to the Dinaric type.

The Dinarics are easily marked out from the other types. They are the typical western Yugo-Slavs, who have kept their national feelings untouched by foreign influences. Although the people of this type have been partitioned by neighboring powers, they have maintained their individuality in spite of all outside interference. The most prominent marks of the mental life of this type are versatile wit, keen intelligence, extreme sensibility, and abundance of intellectual power. These people usually follow their inspirations, caring little for material considerations. An appeal made to their sense of honor or their ideal of liberty and justice brings a quick response. They manifest a vivid desire to live, to develop, to make a success of their careers, and to be worthy representatives of their race. (Stanoyevich, 1919, p. 93)

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<sup>40</sup> In Serbian for South.



As a consequence of the migrations in the Turkish period, my extended family was spread out through the Balkan region. My Mama's roots are from the old West Serbian family from Kordun—today's Croatia, and Tata's from the wild mountains of Montenegro. Their parents and most siblings stayed in those places, and we kept close connections with them. Through those relations, I received an introduction to what I recognize now was the pedagogy of the land—a realization possible only through my exposure, and later attunement, to the Indigenous land-based pedagogy. My memories of those days are filled with beautiful landscapes, caring relatives, soothing times. Our relatives were spread across the country, and each of these places brought something unique, a certain knowledge that I acquired and that I continue to carry with me. Similarly, Ingold (2013) explained that

[the] knowledge of the landscape is gained by walking through it, following various signposted routes... This is not knowledge that has been transmitted *to* me; it is knowledge that has grown *in* me as I have followed the same paths as my predecessors and under their direction. [emphasis in original] (p. 304)

### **Kordun**

Mama's Ancestors came from Kordun, modern-day Croatia. Serbs started actively migrating to Kordun and other neighbouring regions in several migration waves after 1538 when Emperor Ferdinand I, granted them the right to settle on those territories. In exchange for land, they had to conduct military service and participate in the protection of the Habsburg Monarchy's border against the Ottoman Empire (Slipičević, 1963b). The Treaty of Karlovac was signed on January 26, 1699 in Sremski Karlovci, in modern-day Serbia, which concluded the Great Turkish War. Serbs stayed in Kordun and other Serbian regions of Croatia and were expected to receive equal human rights (Slipičević, 1963a). However, in the early 1990s with the fall of Yugoslavia, Croatia wanted to reclaim the independence that the Axis powers installed during WWII and began to actively pursue a policy of persecution against the Serbs. Among them was my Mama's family. To describe just a small part of the horrors that war created, I tell an excerpt of my niece's story—a tragic testament to how a typical rebellious teenager was forced to abruptly become a courageous front-line war medic.



## Jasna

*Jasna was 15 when she learned that she was the only Serb in her class. She attended a medical high school and was hoping to become a nurse one day. She did, but her journey was not as she planned, or as anybody planned. Jasna was asked to leave the class so they could have an “ethnically clean group.” She refused, and then the harassment started—first verbal, then physical. Sadly, not only toward her but all of hers. The attacks were random and unprovoked. Jasna witnessed people being beat up on the street; Her neighbours pressing knives against her parents’ necks. She witnessed her world exploding in a million little pieces. She was a rebellious teenager whose first instinct was to spite her parents. But it was a war time and instead of defying her parents, she rebelled against the new world in which she was forced to live.*

*Her immediate and extended family decided to flee the city and try to find refuge at her grandparents who lived in the traditionally Serbian area, however still in Croatia. They thought they will be safe there. Travelling by road was far too dangerous, practically impossible, so the only option left was to swim across the Mrežnica River, leaving behind all their possessions. Once they reached the “safe” side and climbed onto the riverbank, shivering wet in the October night cold, my sister Nada, turned toward her teenage children, warning them: “In front of us is Balkan and behind is Europe. We are not turning back and I don’t want to hear anybody complain about missing anything!”*

*Jasna completed the ninth grade of a medical high school, and as most nine-graders, she was a know-it-all. She thought that the medical training she received up to that point was enough to join the Serbian field hospital that was set up in the woods, hidden from the Croatian army. She felt an unstoppable urge and strength to help and be useful to the people around her during these difficult times. She begged and when she was unsuccessful, she then threatened her parents that she was going to run away if they don’t let her help at the hospital. My sister relented and took Jasna to her close friend, Dr. Dragica Bakić, that according to Jasna, became her second mother. Jasna proved herself capable of excellent work, and soon after, was working independently. She treated people with war injuries such as bullet wounds, explosive burns, amputated limbs; She assisted in surgeries; She had people die in her arms. At 16, Jasna fully witnessed the horrors of war firsthand. She also delivered her first baby that year.*

*Her parents managed to enroll her back into another medical high school, so she was attending classes and working in the hospital for the next few years. Unfortunately, the war did not subside—on the contrary, the safe space for Serbs on Kordun was getting smaller and the circle around them tightened. In 1995 the newly formed Croatian government ordered their army to execute the military operation “Storm” (Oluja) (Mirković, 2000). Jasna was 19 and at that time the hospital was the only life she knew and she did not want to leave, so she volunteered to stay with the hospital till the end. “Whatever that end was,” she bitterly says*





*nowadays. Some of her colleagues had children and needed to flee with them, to try to take them to safety. For Jasna, the hardest part was to tell her mom that they need to go without her—that she needed to stay behind with the wounded, still hoping someone will help them evacuate the hospital. When my sister Nada heard the news that she needed to leave her daughter behind, she stoically said: "If you didn't stay, I would've been disappointed." Even though she was heartbroken (she still is and never recovered to this day), Nada was proud that her daughter and especially at a such young age, was a hero who would sacrifice her life to help others in need.*

*Jasna and two other nurses stayed in the hospital with dozens of wounded soldiers and civilians, some in critical conditions. For days and weeks, the three nurses were barely sleeping or eating. They were forced to give each other IV therapy so they could continue caring for their patients. They waited for help, and waited, and waited. But the help never came. Reaching every last ounce of strength, they decided to try to transfer the patients by themselves to the recently freed territory in Republic Srpska, Bosnia region. They carried the patients on stretchers, packed the very little remaining food and water, and without any medical supplies, left Petrova Gora hospital and Kordun forever. Because it was unsafe to take the main roads, they only travelled on the country's back roads. To make things worse, they never drove military or any other trucks before. It took them much longer, but they managed to arrive safely at the hospital in Kozara. All the patients in their care survived—their heroic actions saved the lives of many people.*

*A couple of years later, Jasna and her two colleagues were awarded with the State Medals for Bravery. The three nurses knew well enough what bravery is—they worked in the frontlines and everyday risked their lives every day. Jasna was wounded twice, and is still keeping that information from her mother. They did not need to air their sacrifices and beat their chests as a sign of victory. Thus, all three nurses refused to receive the awards. They grew suspicious of states who give out awards instead of sending help to the wounded soldiers who defended them. After all, they said, they were only doing what anybody else in their position would have done. Or should have done.*

During the "Storm" operation, more than 250,000 Serbs were forced to flee Croatia, of which several thousand never reached Serbia. Some of these people who died on the road on the way to freedom were my family members. My aunt Mileva, my Mama's closest sister, was one of them...

The lines of a poem Vučić (2017) wrote about her life in Kordun are pulsing like a pain that we carry within ourselves. She is writing about, now abandoned and destroyed "Monument to the Uprising of the People of Kordun and Banija." The monument was erected as a celebration of the ethnic Serbs in Croatia who fought against Nazism and



occupation. Originally, the monument celebrated the uprising and resistance movement of the people of Kordun and Banija against Nazi fascism and commemorates the victims of Nazism, both civilian victims and fallen resistance fighters. However, after 1991 and the beginning of the Croatian war against Serbian people, that and other Serbian related cultural and religious monuments were devastated. Sadly, even after more than three decades, the devastation of this monument continues to date as local people continue stripping the stainless steel plates off of whatever was left of the monument.

### **Barren Yellow Soil**

*First, they moved us (so they tell us), to this  
barren yellow Kordun soil,  
and they allowed us to love her and grow with her, rugged and  
inaccessible as herself...*

*They let us fight people and beasts.*

*Defending something without knowing what...*

*In that fight, only we suffered...*

*And when we'd won and when we'd lost, we just counted the dead...The  
white scarves of our traditional dresses that we wore every day were  
replaced by the black ones<sup>41</sup>...*

*Then they erected a monument for us too...They say for the victims...And  
somehow it seems it is for us too...because they have already decided to  
move us...*

*To remove us from that arid soil...*

*And we moved away...*

*It remained a monument of our suffering, our ignorance, and our  
knowledge...As cracked and torn as we are...with still only a lone piece of  
sheet metal...*

*When the last piece of metal is removed and used for some practical  
purposes, like we are, the glow will disappear, the memory will fade...It  
remains only an austere construction, hideous and inaccessible like we  
are...<sup>42</sup>*

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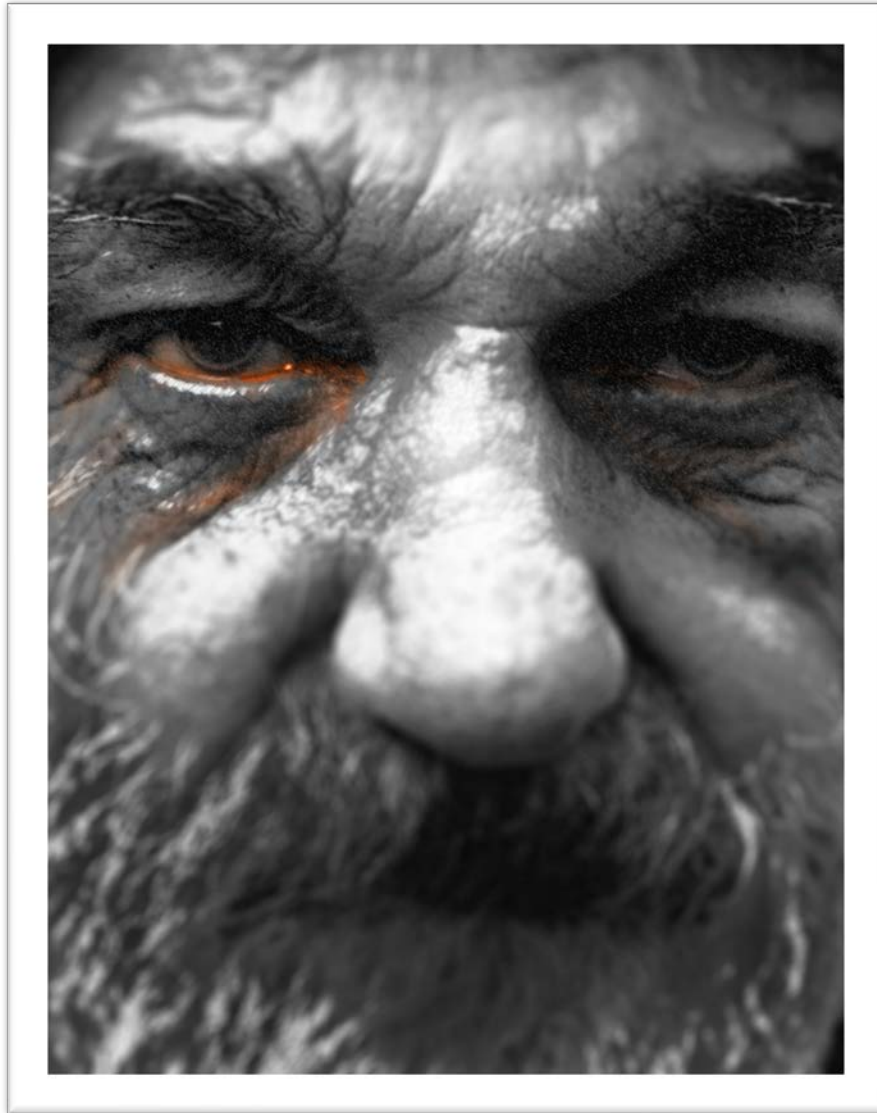
<sup>41</sup> Elderly Serbian women wear black scarves when in mourning.

<sup>42</sup> "Prvo su nas doselili (tako nam kažu), na tu posnu Kordunašku žutulju, pustili da je zavolimo i srastemo sa njom, grubo i nepristupačni kao i ona sama...Da se borimo sa ljudima i zvijerima, braneći nešto, ne znajući ni sami šta...U toj borbi samo smo stradali...I kad smo pobjeđivali i kad smo gubili, samo smo brojali mrtve...Bijele marame narodne nošnje, u svakodnevnom životu



**Figure 8**

*A Man Crying a Land, Digital, Maljković, 2020*



The text above stands as a testament to the suffering and pain of many. The poem speaks to me in a trembling voice. I see inserted ellipsis as tears rolling down the prematurely aged cheeks landing in a mouth, forming a pool of sorrow that will always remain. That bitter sorrow oozes from every pore of our collective being, soaks and

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zamijenile su crne...Onda su nam digli i spomenik...Kažu stradalima...A meni se nekako čini svima...jer već su bili rešili da nas odsele...Da nas maknu sa te posne žutulje...I makli smo se...Ostao je spomenik našeg stradanja, našeg neznanja i našeg saznanja...Oronuo i očerupan kao i mi sami...Svjetli još poneki komad lima...A kad se otkine i poslednji komad metala i bude upotrebljen u neke praktične namene ko što smo i sami bili, neće sjaj, neće sjećanje...Ostaće samo gruba konstrukcija, rogovatna i nepristupačna ko što smo i sami bili..." [my translation].at



stains our stamina creating a caustic sense of shame—both adaptive and maladaptive emotion. Wounded shame for being driven from the homes our Ancestors built for us feels similar to the shame that abuse victims often experience. Cowardly shame for not being able to protect the land we inherited. Remorseful shame for not being able to pass our inheritance to our Descendants. There are more types of shame and all taste different. I since learned to decipher, classify, and resolve these flavours of shame and direct them toward different uses—many as prolific drivers for preserving our heritage and culture. While my childhood memories are forever infected with this phantom pain—a real sensation of an amputated part, the teachings are etched into my existence.

I loved visiting Kordun. I relished my Mama's infectious excitement, our relatives welcoming us with prepared food and spending long evenings sitting around the table, eating, talking, enjoying each other. I remember my visits of Kordun as happy and sweet, full of sunshine. I remember running barefooted through the tall grass on a summer day. I remember one day, I stepped on a thorn, and I limped to my aunt's house looking for an adult to help me. While my aunt was treating my foot, she told me an interesting story that talks about the reason a human foot is curved. She was telling me that in nature there is a reason for everything and us humans, we just must stay still long enough to be able to understand it. Here is a version of that story:

### **Why Isn't the Sole Flat in Humans?**

*When the devils fell off from Heaven and fled to Earth, they took the Sun with them. The Devil King impaled the Sun on a spear and carried it on his shoulder. Then Earth complained to God that the Sun is too close and it will burn everything. God sent Saint Archangel to take the Sun from the Devil.*

*When Saint Archangel descended to Earth he united with the Devil. The Devil felt what was coming to him, so he decided to outsmart Saint Archangel. While roaming Earth, the two of them came to the sea and began to swim. The Devil struck the spear with the Sun into the ground. After swimming for a while, Saint Archangel said,*

*“Let's dive, let's see who can go deeper.”*

*The Devil agreed. Saint Archangel dived, and on the way back up, carried the sand from the bottom of the sea in his mouth. When it was the Devil's turn to dive, he was afraid that Saint Archangel will take the Sun away from him. He spat on the ground, and from his spittle became a crow to guard the Sun while he dived. As the Devil dived, Saint Archangel crossed the sea with his hand, which caused it to freeze. Saint Archangel*



*took the Sun and started to flee to Heaven. When she saw all that, the crow started to shriek. When the Devil heard the crow, he tried to surface but the ice was too thick. He dove to the bottom, took a rock, and swam up to break the ice. As he surfaced, he chased after Saint Archangel who was running away. Just as Saint Archangel stepped with one foot into Heaven, the Devil caught up, and with his fingernails, pulled a large piece of flesh out of the Saint's sole.*

*When Saint Archangel appeared wounded carrying the Sun to God, he cried,*

*"What am I going to do, God? My foot is ruined!"*

*And God said to him,*

*"Do not be afraid—I will order all people to have a small valley on their soles."*

*And so, God did, and in all people a small valley appears on the soles of both feet. It remains so to this day.<sup>43</sup>*

Amazed with that story, I grew an appreciation for Saint Archangel's sacrifices and began to take better care of my feet after that.

Very special are my memories of the untouched, pristine nature, spending time with Mama roaming through the uncharted territories of her childhood and youth. Mostly by foot and sometimes by car, we travelled around dense evergreen forests, vast stretches of meadows, fertile arable land, lush grasslands, pastures full of livestock,

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<sup>43</sup> "Zašto u ljudi nije taban ravan? Kada su djavoli otpali od Boga i utekli na zemlju, onda su i sunce odneli sa sobom, pa ga djavolski car nabio na koplje i nosio na ramenu. Kada već zemlja protuži Bogu da hoće sva da izgori od sunca, onda Bog pošlje svetog Arandjela, da gleda kako da uzme sunce od djavola. Kada sidje sveti Arandjel na zemlju, a on se odruži sa djavolskim carem; ali se djavolski car osjeti šta on hoće, pa se dobro uzme u pamet. Hodajući tako po zemlji njih dvojica zajedno dodju na more i stanu da se kupaju; a djavo udari koplje sa suncem u zemlju. Pošto se malo prokupaju, onda reče sveti Arandjel: "De da ronimo, da gledamo koji može dublje." A djavo mu odgovori: "Hajde de." Onda sveti Arandjel zaroni, i iznese u zubima pijeska morskoga. Sada treba i djavo da zaroni, ali se boji da mu sveti Arandjel dotle ne odnese sunce. U tom mu padne na um, te pljune na zemlju, i od njegove pljuvanke postane svraka da mu čuva sunce dok on zaroni i iznese u zubima morskoga pijeska. Kako djavo zaroni, a sveti Arandjel prekrski rukom more, te na njemu postane led od devet aršina debeo; pa onda spopadne sunce i pobjegne k Bogu, a svrake stane kreka. Kada djavo čuje svraciji glas, onda već vidi šta je, pa se brže bolje vrati natrag. Kad gore, ali se more zaledilo ne može na polje! Onda se brže bolje vrati na dno mora, te uzme kamen i njim probije led, pa onda poteci za svetijem Arandjelom! Onaj bježi, a ovaj za njim! Taman kad sveti Arandjel korači jednom nogom k Bogu na nebo, a onda djavo stigne, te mu noktima iz tabana u druge noge iščupa veliki komad mesa. Kad sveti Arandjel dodje sa suncem onako ranjen kod Boga onda zaplače: "Što cu, Bože, ovako grdan?" A Bog mu reče: "Ćuti, ne boj se; Ja cu narediti da svi ljudi imaju tako na tabanu kao malu dolinu." I tako Bog uradi, te u sviju ljudi postane na tabanima u obadvije noge kao mala dolina. I tako ostane i do danas." [my translation] (Stefanović Karadžić, 2017, p. 123)



deciduous groves, orchards, vineyards, small hills and towering mountains in the distance, valleys, streams, rivers, and small lakes. Endless, inexhaustible nature. Mama emerged from this land, learned from it, understood its pedagogy, and was trying to pass on the teachings and instill its values in us as well. Besides the tremendous gratitude toward nature's gifts, her sadness was also infectious due to the increased technological changes and pollution she witnessed year after year. We were young, inexperienced, living in the moment, still not able to fully grasp the seriousness of the situation, to respect the past, and fear (for) the future.

Many years later, I learned that feeling of forever lost ecological innocence is shared by many. Kelly (2015) vividly describes her emotions about the disastrous and inevitable changes:

I remember wandering down to the edge of a polluted river feeling a tearing tension in my heart, because I could see how deeply distressed the elders were. The once glorious river of the past was now laboring for its own existence let alone her ability to offer her sacred waters to others. These transformations are happening, not only ecologically, but they are also challenging the very core of a peoples understanding of the landscape as a sacred place, as a sentient ecology of being. (p. 3)

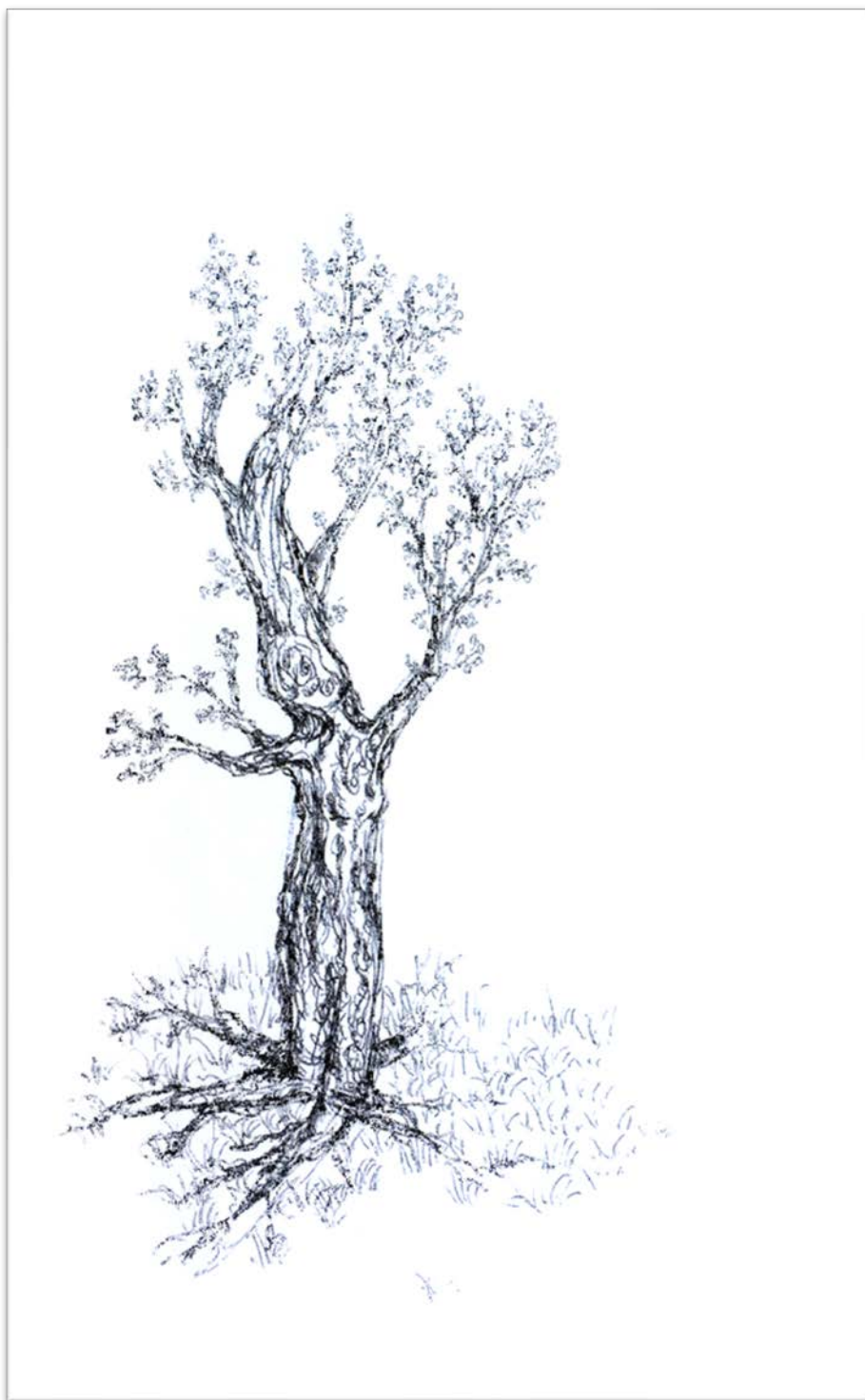
The people of Kordun region lived well and in a harmonious relationship with the place. In the book *Look to the Mountain, An Ecology of Indigenous Education*, Cajete (1994) explained:

The Indigenous ideal of living "a good life" in Indian traditions is, at times, referred to by Indian people as striving "to always think the highest thought." This metaphor refers to the framework of a sophisticated epistemology of community-based ecological education. This is an epistemology in which the community and its mythically authenticated traditions support a way of life and quality of thinking that embodies an ecologically-informed consciousness. (p. 46)



**Figure 9**

*Growth, Ink on Paper, Maljković, 2013*



Reading Cajete has reconnected me to my origins: the five ways of thinking and knowing he explained corresponds to the ways of thinking and being in the world I learned from my parents and their Ancestors. I have selected his considerations and relate them to the teachings I know that are in turn informing my inquiry:

#### The Place:

Cajete teaches us that “one has to come to terms with where one physically lives. One has to know one’s home, one’s village, and then the land, the earth upon which one lives” (p. 47). Even when we relocate, collectively or individually, we carry with us the teachings of the land and to continue to learn with and from every land on which we settle, temporarily or permanently. However, for many, migrating to the cities and urban areas, meant disconnecting from nature and with that from the original laws that can never be disregarded. Teachings were forgotten. Natural environments (soil, plants, animals) contrary to the human behaviour and expectations are not inexhaustible. In his novel “Ishmael” Daniel Quinn (1992) tackles the topic from the gorilla’s point of view. Ishmael criticized us: “[T]he earth alone is sufficient; it is the birthplace and home of man, and that’s its meaning. [You] regard the world as a sort of human life-support system, as a machine designed to produce and sustain human life” (p. 35). Re-connecting to nature, even as miniscule as planting a tomato plant on our 17th floor high-rise 32ft balcony, observing a circle of life, and calculating food portions for a four-member family, may bring us closer to thinking “the highest thought.” I raise my hands to Richard Wagamese who in his book *One Story, One Song* (2011), offers a clear and straightforward message to his fellow humans: “We are one spirit, one song, and our world will be harmonious only when we make time to care. For ourselves. For each other. For our home. You don’t need to be a Native person to understand that—just human” (p. 37).





Relationships:

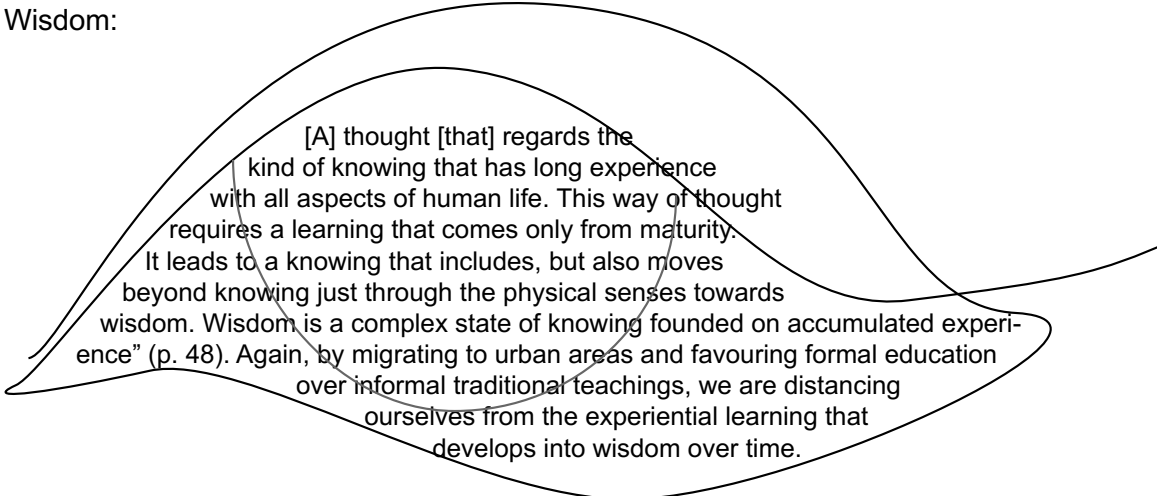
“[A] thought [that] occurs in relationship to other people, plants, animals, natural elements, and phenomena. This type of thought and knowing revolves around consciously understanding the nature of one’s relationships to other people, other life, and the natural world” (p.48). Understanding our infinite connectedness, respecting different positions we contribute to that process, embedding the sense of relations to the cultural practices are the fundamentals for any healthy community. Constant reminder of the effect we have on our human and non-human surroundings, and expectations of relationship maintenance as an integral part of our daily routine.

Personal agency:

As part of our teachings, establishing expectations for young and developing persons to practice sensible and accountable “reflective contemplation, speaking, and acting. This involves applying the capacity to think things through completely, to make wise choices, to speak responsibly for purpose and effect, and to act decisively to produce something that is useful and has spirit” (p. 48). However, when we witness them struggling on their way, we need to offer and expect reciprocal trust even when seemingly undeserved and teach them to tolerate and accept pain and suffering as points of navigation and positioning. Accepting that there is no age limit and final goal for this learning process and constantly carving out the space for this reflective practice, provide us with hope for the highest outcomes.

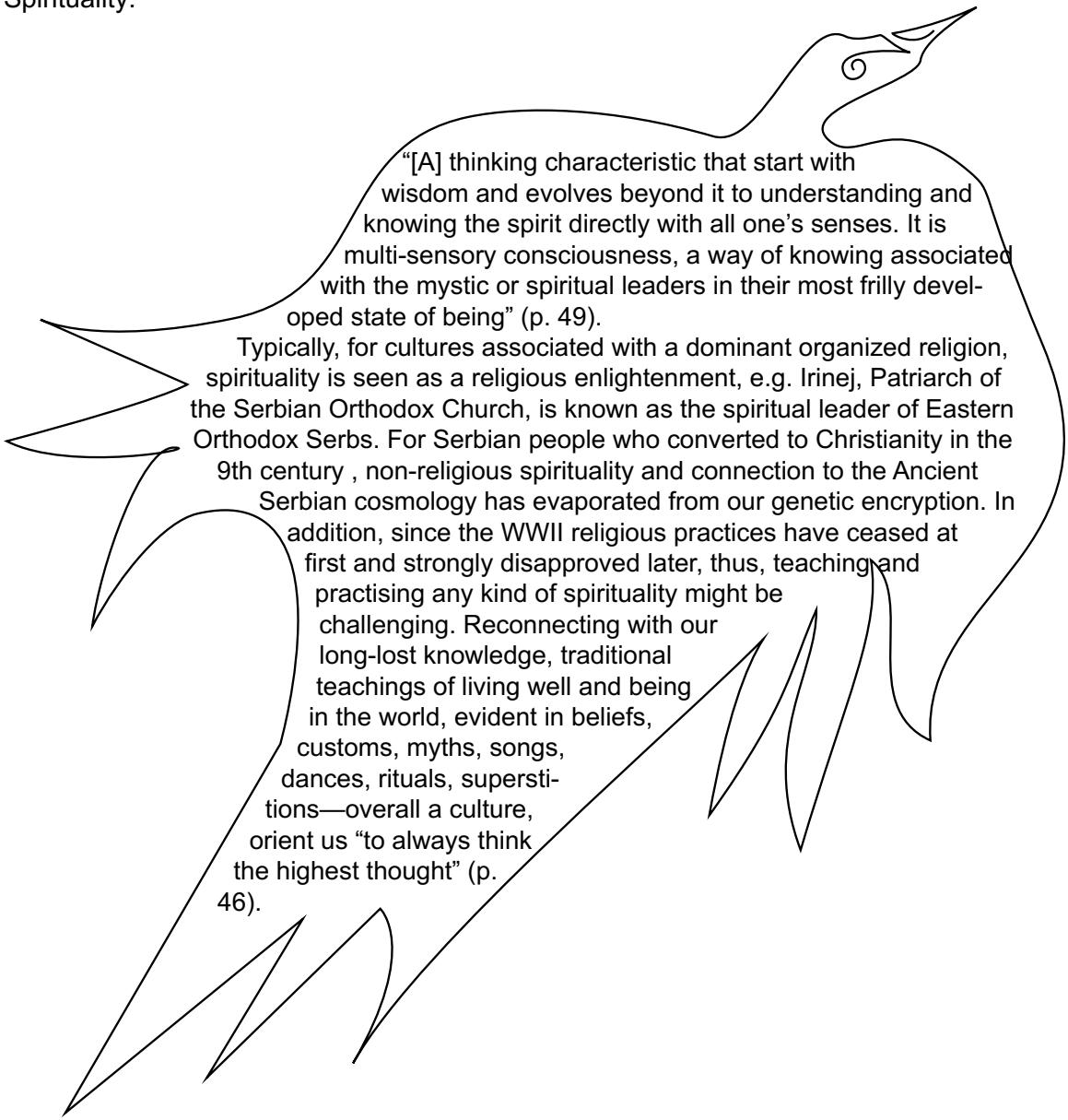


## Wisdom:



[A] thought [that] regards the kind of knowing that has long experience with all aspects of human life. This way of thought requires a learning that comes only from maturity. It leads to a knowing that includes, but also moves beyond knowing just through the physical senses towards wisdom. Wisdom is a complex state of knowing founded on accumulated experience” (p. 48). Again, by migrating to urban areas and favouring formal education over informal traditional teachings, we are distancing ourselves from the experiential learning that develops into wisdom over time.

## Spirituality:



“[A] thinking characteristic that start with wisdom and evolves beyond it to understanding and knowing the spirit directly with all one’s senses. It is multi-sensory consciousness, a way of knowing associated with the mystic or spiritual leaders in their most frilly developed state of being” (p. 49).

Typically, for cultures associated with a dominant organized religion, spirituality is seen as a religious enlightenment, e.g. Irinej, Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, is known as the spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodox Serbs. For Serbian people who converted to Christianity in the 9th century , non-religious spirituality and connection to the Ancient Serbian cosmology has evaporated from our genetic encryption. In addition, since the WWII religious practices have ceased at first and strongly disapproved later, thus, teaching and practising any kind of spirituality might be challenging. Reconnecting with our long-lost knowledge, traditional teachings of living well and being in the world, evident in beliefs, customs, myths, songs, dances, rituals, superstitions—overall a culture, orient us “to always think the highest thought” (p. 46).



Many years later, I read Lyle and Snowber (2021) Walking as attunement essay, with which I deeply resonated—many of the practices they described I have inherited from my Mama and am now passing them to my daughters. Lyle and Snowber’s poetic approach to curriculum theory inspires me to look at my own lived experiences and “listen to my own tears” (p. 14). They explained that,

Being physically and spiritually attuned to the world around us forms the loom on which we weave our curricular understandings. Here, we strive to find the extraordinary in the ordinary and make room for a poetic way of attending to the lived curriculum. More than a way of doing research, we regard this way of being as a deep and disciplined presence with/in the world we inhabit. (p. 6)

My connection to place was not only characterized by Mama’s birthplace Kordun. Her love of travel and people helped to develop my natural curiosity. She instilled her sense of reciprocal relationship in me, and I grew up deeply connected to all my relatives and all their relatives. Cajete (1994) and Kelly (2012) shared the wonderful Lakota people’s phrase, often quoted beyond the boundaries of Lakota people’s culture: Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ. That is a prayer of oneness and harmony with all forms of life: other people, animals, birds, insects, trees, and plants, and even rocks, rivers, and mountains—we *are all related*. This phrase captures an essence of Tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world” (Cajete, 1994, p. 26). Furthermore, “[t]his profound reciprocal sense that ‘we are all related, we are *all related*, we are *all related*’ is central to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and participating in the world.” (Kelly, 2012, p. 364).

### ***Banat***

One of my maternal aunt’s family lived in Stari Lec, a small village in the Banat region of Northern Serbia, where wheat, barley, oats, rye, tobacco, corn, sunflower, as well as vineyards are grown. I remember running through the golden fields of tall and thick corn playing hide and seek, stealing the neighbours’ grapes, being outside and free from dawn to dusk. I can still feel the chill on my spine from laying on the damp land for hours, reading books and eating unripe sour apples. I remember rushing to deliver milk to my aunt’s customers, arguing with my cousins over who will feed the chickens and trying to keep the goats from running away. I still remember falling asleep looking at the



starry sky and waking up to the smell of my aunt's famous Banat donuts<sup>44</sup> that I only ever ate there, as nobody else would make them like my aunt Milka.

Northern Serbia is recognizable for its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity. There are more than 26 ethnic groups, and six languages are in official use by the provincial administration. The region is known for extensive cultural diversity which is evident in cultural practices, behaviours, genetic dispositions, knowledge, music, dance, myths, rituals, architecture, wardrobe, cuisines, languages, and dialects.

### **Montenegro**

My Tata's family comes from the wild and rugged mountains of Montenegro where I was born and spent the first couple of years of my life. My paternal Baba Jelisava lived on the outskirts of Podgorica with her beloved cow Dunda. She was a strong woman made of the same type of stone of which she was surrounded, she refused to allow her children or anybody else to take care of her. I was always amazed by the extraordinary nature in Montenegro—from the capricious coast in the South, to the majestic mountains in the North, and everything in between. Baba Jelisava would proudly state that nobody could conquer its impulsive nature: "We have to live with the temperamental effects of these mountains and the sea below." she would explain. Montenegrins are incredibly proud of this pristine nature—my heart swelled with pride when back in 1991, Montenegrin political leaders declared Montenegro the world's first ecological state.

They say Montenegrins are honourable, indomitable people; the land, Montenegro, meaning black mountain in Italian, is wild and unconquerable, among the countries with the least arable land of only 0.7 percent. Boehm (1984), an American anthropologist who lived in Montenegro between 1963 and 1966 shared the observation that

[w]hen the Western world discovered the tribal Montenegrins...these giant warriors lived in large territorial groups, regulated their own political affairs, and were organized to fight fiercely and effectively to defend their tribal lands. The tribesmen spent much of their energy in warfare, headhunting, and raiding against external enemies; (p. 3)

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<sup>44</sup> Banatske krofne.



Our family belongs to Vasojević Pleme<sup>45</sup>, the largest and one of seven Highland tribes of Montenegro. Boehm (1984) painted a vivid picture of a tribal life he experienced by living with the people of a neighbouring Pleme Gornja Morača:

[T]here were times when the entire tribe gathered for an important event, either to attend a funeral or to celebrate a religious or national holiday by singing, dancing, joyously firing off pistols into the air, and drinking plum brandy in large, cordial social groups. At these times, as an honored foreign guest, I was able to sense the presence of tribal unity very directly. (p. 7)

Being part of Pleme is the way to *be* in Montenegro, a way to learn, to know, to pass on knowledge—our mythopoetic approach to axiology, ontology, epistemology. Similarly to other tribal societies, our profound reciprocal relation to one another and our environment, animals, plants, mountains, sea, informs a sense of existence:

Indigenous worldviews are conveyed via stories, symbols, models, and metaphors and expressed unconsciously or consciously through family, community, art, the media, spirituality, and educational institutions; all of which guide the people in respectfully caring for each other and all their relations. The stories contain the historical events that transformed the earth over time, and the guiding principles for good relational living. The stories metaphorically relate central ideas of interdependence and respect for plants, animals, places, and for those behaviours that each generation must learn in order to maintain a reciprocal relationship with the natural world. (Snively & Williams, 2016, p. 33)

How we imagine the world around us often comes from our family or cultural stories. For example, as a very young child, I learned about a poisonous snake “Poskok” from our Baba Jelisava’s stories, who, as a young woman, nearly died from the snake’s bite. Poskok is a large, highly poisonous snake with long fangs and a distinctive single “horn” on the snout. Among the local folk, a Poskok snake is known for jumping, twisting/coiling in a circle, and rolling downhill. Typically, the snake could recoil about 40-50 cm. Interesting to note that the snake was named Poskok<sup>46</sup>, a jumper in local languages, based on its behaviour, while in Western science it is known as a Horn Viper, based on its physical appearance.

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<sup>45</sup> In Montenegrin for tribe. Even though Serbian and Montenegrin languages are the same, I respect the wishes of Montenegrin people to recognize their language as Montenegrin, thus I refer to it as such while in Montenegro section.

<sup>46</sup> Skok in Montenegrin means a jump.



Walking barefoot on the dry and cracked Montenegrin pallid soil that always felt as if it was covered with some ancient enchanted dust, somehow made me believe in all those implausible stories, such as a story of monks lead by Bishop Vasilije who built the monastery on the side of a mountain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Bishop Vasilije was later venerated as a Saint Basil of Ostrog, and his Saint Day is celebrated on May 12. The monastery is situated against an almost vertical background, high up in the towering rock of the mountain Ostrog, and people say there is a mystical vine that grows out of the same rock. Nothing should be able to grow out of the sheer rock face, but in Montenegro, it does.

Growing up, I was particularly fond of Tata's stories of regular folk who would transform into invincible heroes at the smallest sign of endangerment to their families, tribes, land, and most important for Montenegrin people—honour. Defending family honour came before everything else. The most respected and celebrated way to die meant defending the family honour. Boehm (1984), who focused on Montenegrin ethics, wrote that “they also carried on vicious blood feuds among themselves in which the males of one clan had free licence to kill any male in an enemy clan, and vice versa.” (p. 3).

I have heard one of those stories first-hand from my Stric<sup>47</sup> Božidar, Tata's distant cousin from Vasojević Pleme<sup>48</sup>. He told me a story about the tragedy of a blood feud in his immediate family. I re-tell the story as I remember it in honour of my late Stric Božidar.

### **The Story of Panta**

*At the turn of the century, Stric Božidar's father Panta was given a duty to revenge one of his clan's members who was brutally killed by an enemy clan. Young Panta was married only a few years before, had one small child and another on the way. He knew that most probably he, or someone from his immediate family, was the next target in that blood feud chain, but he also knew he had to do whatever was required of him—he must defend his Pleme's honour, and the honour of his family.*

*That pivotal day came. Panta woke up in the middle of the night. The air was dark and thick, sticky from all the emotions. He tried to sneak out*

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<sup>47</sup> In Montenegrin for uncle–father's brother or male cousin to differentiate from Ujak–mother's brother or male cousin.

<sup>48</sup> In Montenegrin for Vasojević Tribe.



*from the bed without waking his wife, but she was already awake, curled up on the side, crying softly like a wounded animal. When she saw him get up, she quickly jumped out of bed to make him breakfast. He only waived his hand once and she stopped, slowly sitting on the edge of the tottering old chair they inherited from his mother, still ready to jump on her feet if he needed her. He didn't. Never again. She watched him go around their small one-room house getting ready for the that dreadful duty. He stopped by their son's bed watching him sleep peacefully. He gently stroked the boy's hair and slowly turned toward his wife. He nodded and she quickly got up to hug him. She started crying and he firmly pulled her from his chest and stepped toward the door. As he was crossing the doorway, he stopped, turned around to see her one more time, then quickly disappear into the night. He had to walk at least three hours through the thick woods to reach the enemy's village. The woods are full of wolf packs, but that was the least of his worries. When he climbed the last hill before the valley where the enemy's village lay, he slowed his pace and eventually stopped. Raising his head, he stopped and sniffed the air as wild animals check for a nearby danger. When he reached the valley, a faint light on the East sky started to appear. It diluted the dark night's deep blue with the morning's rose-gold white.*

*"Biće danas vruć dan<sup>49</sup>", Panta said out loud. He saw somebody open a window and a dog barked—the village began to wake up.*

*He recognized the house immediately. He banged on the door, and a dark-haired woman hastily answered. He stood there stoically, almost in a dark, making no sound. Suddenly she grasped who he was and as she lost every bone in her body, submissively threw herself at his feet, begging him for mercy.*

*"Mak' se u stranu, ženo!<sup>50</sup>", growled Panta.*

*Her husband appeared in the doorway, calm and dignified, anticipating his death. Panta fired his firelock and immediately turned around, without waiting to see if he had killed the man. He later said that the last memory of his first life was that woman's despairing wail. The cry of a woman caressing her dead husband's body echoed through the mountains, rolled through the valleys, and remained in Panta's soul, torturing him for the rest of his life.*

*Straightaway, Panta surrendered to Guardia, the local authorities. At first, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but during a political turmoil, his sentence was reduced to 40 years. In his act of surrendering to the authorities, he managed to end the bloody feud because whereas he was not killed—his life ceased to exist. While some praised him for his actions, he was publicly condemned by the rest of his Pleme.*

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<sup>49</sup> In Montenegrin for "It is going to be a warm day." [my translation].

<sup>50</sup> In Montenegrin for "Move to the side, woman!" [my translation].



*Once they learned about the life sentence, his wife's family started to pressure her to leave her husband to rot in jail [in Stric Božidar's words]. She initially refused because she loved and respected her husband. However, after a few years of struggle to survive and to raise her children [she was shunted by half of their village], she stopped resisting and unwillingly succumbed to the persuasion of her family. She left their house to live with an old widower at a neighbouring village, who generously agreed to let her bring her children as well. Panta never saw them again.*

*Following the end of his prison sentence, he moved to the other part of Montenegro, re-married, and, in his advanced 60s, the new wife gave birth to his last son Božidar. Unfortunately, Panta did not live long, so even his youngest son grew up without a father. He came to know him from the stories he heard from his mother.*

My Stric Božidar told this story almost emotionless, factually, without the blame in his tone. I cried, and he comforted me:

"Don't cry mila<sup>51</sup>, those were the hard times. There was little of everything, people struggled to survive, but they had to obey the code. Respect and heroism engraved the code by which we lived: humbleness, compassion, protection of the infirm, respect for a given word, a sense of gratitude for the work done...."

He does not accuse his father; he understands him. Even nowadays, many Montenegrins believe in life in accordance with the notion of virtue as it is accepted and established in the memory of the national community, in other words, family pride and glory, however, the brutal and inhumane practice of bloody feud has been eradicated. I hope it will never be repeated.

Traditionally, the stories were shared verbally and accompanied by the South Slavic musical instrument gusle, a single-stringed musical instrument traditionally used in the Dinarides region of the Balkans. Many Montenegrins know how to play well, however unfortunately, I have never learned.

I was particularly fascinated to discover that there were still a number of men in the tribe who played the mournful, Middle-Eastern-sounding instrument called the gusle. This was used for accompaniment as they improvised or recited from memory long and vivid heroic epics about their own local tribal heroes. They also sang about the Eastern Orthodox

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<sup>51</sup> In Montenegrin for "my dear." [my translation].





Serbian ethnic group to which Montenegrins belong and which speaks the same Slavic language. (Boehm, 1984, p. 8)

In 2018, singing to the accompaniment of the gusle was inscribed on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2018). Gusle,

a simple string instrument – is an ancient art of performing primarily heroic epics practiced for centuries as a form of historical memory and an expression of cultural identity. Performances involve a complex form of interaction between the audience and performer and are based on the skills and creativity of soloist artists (guslars): the guslars' ability to dramatize poetic content, body language and charisma are key for successful performances. The repertoire includes songs predominantly about mythical and historical heroes, events from the legendary past, ancient or recent history and, less commonly, ballads and humorous songs. (para. 1)

I have heard stories about five century-long resistances to the forces of the Ottoman Empire and later the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey) in WWI or to the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) in WWII. Due to the constant rebellions and uprisings, Ottoman Empire's Sultan granted a special status to Montenegro as a barren mountain area inhabited by the belligerent Montenegrin tribes (Živković, 1998).

Important to note that until Vuk Stefanović Karadžić began his work on reforming the Serbian alphabet (азбука) and with that making literary works more available to the general population, written language and literacy among the Serbian folk were at a very low level. The cultural knowledge, with the exception to Church scripts written in Old Church Slavonic language and alphabet, was mainly passed orally and through the ceremonies, rituals, and other traditional practices. The well-known stories about local heroes fighting the oppressors were told by guslars as poems and preserved as oral tradition until Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (2017) collected and recorded them in the 1800s. The most famous of all heroes was Kraljević Marko<sup>52</sup> 1335–1395, who left a deep mark in Serbian medieval epic poetry.

Kraljević Marko is by far the most sung character and the main hero not only with Serbs and Montenegrins, but also with Bulgarians, Macedonians, Croats, and Slovenes. The myths of his miraculous fights against the Ottoman tyrants, his faithful piebald horse Šarac, and always present mace weighing 66 oka (around 85 kg), painted him as a protector of the weak and powerless, righteous, and merciful, and mythically empowered

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<sup>52</sup> Prince Marko.



to the heights of ancient heroes. Despite his real-life title of a prince and later in his life a king as well as this mythical status of a legendary hero, he possessed virtues of an ordinary man:

They asked Kraljević Marko how he became a hero, and he answered that he learned heroism from dogs and children: If one dog, even if it was the biggest and strongest, is scared and runs away, then all the other dogs run after it; Similarly, when the child runs away, the other children run after him. However, when a dog or a child, even the smallest and weakest, stops to defend himself, then nobody else will dare to attack him. (Stefanović Karadžić, 2009, p. 251)

However, most importantly, how people described their beloved hero and saviour highlights the virtues they endeavored to preserve and deepen in the next generations to come. These virtues include spiritual, emotional, and physical strength, relations to one another, to the nature—plants and animals, to the spiritual world and ancestry, bravery, compassion, and wholeheartedness. Most of these qualities are evident in the following poem, one of many that glorify Kraljević Marko and his triumph (Marko Kraljević i orao, n.d.<sup>53</sup>).

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<sup>53</sup> "Marko Kraljević i orao, Leži Marko kraj druma careva, pokrio se zelenom dolamom, po obrazu smajli-maramom, čelo glave koplje udario, za koplje je Šarac konjic svezan, na koplju je sura tica orle, širi krila, Marku čini hlada, a u kljunu nosi vode hladne, te zapaja ranjena junaka. Al' besedi iz gorice vila: „O, boga ti, sura tico orle, što je tebi dobra učinio, učinio Kraljeviću Marko, širiš krila te mu činiš hlada, i u kljunu nosiš vode hladne, te zapajaš ranjena junaka?“ Al' besedi sura tica orle: „Muči vilo, mukom se zamukla! Kako m' nije dobra učinio, učinio Kraljeviću Marko? Možeš znati i pametovati, kad izgibe vojska na Kosovu, I obadva cara poginuše, car Murate i kneže Lazare, pade krvca konju do strmašca, i junaku do svil'na pojasa, po njoj plove konji i junaci, konj do konja, junak do junaka? A mi tice doletismo gladne, doletismo i gladne i žedne, ljudskoga se nahranismo mesa, i krvi se ljudske napojismo, a moja se krila zakvasiše; planu sunce iz neba vedroga, te se moja krila okoreše, ja ne mogoh s kril'ma poletiti, a moje je društvo odletilo, ja ostadoh nasred polja ravna, te me gaze konji i junaci. Bog donese Kraljevića Marka, uze mene iz krvi junačke, odnese me u goru zelenu, pa me metnu na jelovu granu. Iz nebesa sitan dažd udari, te se moja krila poopraše, i ja mogoh s kril'ma poletiti. Poletiti po gori zelenoj, sastadoh se s mojom družbinicom. Drugo mi je dobro učinio, učinio Kraljeviću Marko: možeš znati i pametovati, kad izgore varoš na Kosovu i izgore kula Adžagina? Onda bili moji orlušići, pa ih skupi Kraljeviću Marko, on ih skupi u svil'na nedarca, odnese ih dvoru bijelome, pa ih hrani čitav mesec dana, čitav mesec i nedelju više, pa ih pusti u goru zelenu, sastadoh se s moji orlušići; to je meni učinio Marko“. Spominje se Kraljeviću Marko, kao dobar danak u godini." [my translation].



## Marko Kraljević and the Eagle

*Marko lies by the emperor's road,  
covered with a green coat,  
with a scarf on his face,  
the spear struck by his head,  
his horse Šarac tied to the spear,  
on the spear sits a great gray eagle,  
with his wings he makes shade for Marko,  
and carries cold water in his beak,  
so he can feed a wounded hero.*

*The mountain fairy saw him:  
"Oh, my God, great gray eagle,  
what good has he done to you,  
Marko Kraljević,  
so you spread your wings and shade him,  
and you carry cold water in your beak  
so you can feed a wounded hero?"*

*The great gray eagle speaks:  
"Quiet fairy, be quiet and silent!  
What good has he done to me,  
Marko Kraljević?"*

*Have you not seen  
when the army in Kosovo died  
and both kings lost their lives,  
Sultan Murad and King Lazar,  
and the blood streamed to the horses' chest  
and the heroes' silk belts,  
horses and heroes swam in it,  
horse to horse, hero to hero?  
And we, the eagles came hungry,  
we flew in hungry and thirsty,  
we ate human flesh,  
and we drank human blood,*

*and my wings got wet with the blood;  
the sun burned from the clear sky,  
and my wings hardened,  
so I couldn't fly anymore,  
and my friends flew away,  
so I stayed in the middle of the war field,  
trampled by horses and heroes.  
God brought Kraljević Marko,  
who raised me from the blooded field,  
took me to the green mountain,  
and put me on a fir tree.  
A light rain fell from the sky,  
and my wings got washed,  
so I could fly away.  
I flew over the green mountain,  
and I reunited with my wife.*

*He has done another good,  
Marko Kraljević:  
Have you not seen  
when a town in Kosovo burned down  
and in the tower of Adjagin?  
In the tower were my little eagles,  
so Marko gathered them,  
he gathered them into his chest,  
took them to the white castle,  
fed them for a whole month,  
and after a month and one week,  
he released them to the green mountain,  
And I reunited with my little eagles;  
that's what Marko did for me."*

*For we celebrate Marko Kraljević  
like we celebrate a good day.*

The myth of Kraljević Marko instilled and maintained hope in subjugated and oppressed people and allowed them to dream of freedom and cultural persistence for the long five hundred years of the Ottoman empire occupancy. Further, this mythopoetic construction represents the way of life, the worldview, the values and respected virtues, and the complete way of being in the world—the way we *are*. The reiteration of these beliefs through folk songs and other traditional practices demonstrates the profound understanding of existence requirements, as “success in properly educating each community member was a matter of survival and continuity for the whole culture” (Cajete, 1994, p. 180).



**Figure 10**

*Untitled, Graphite on Paper, Maljković, 2014*



I recognize and respect the idiosyncrasy of the Montenegrin nation<sup>54</sup> and despite the fact that I lived in Montenegro for only the first couple of years of my life, I have always worn my ancestry 'on my sleeve' honestly and openly. However, Montenegrins are often misunderstood, judged, denied, ridiculed, and because I openly identified as Montenegrin, I was often discriminated against. My Montenegrin sense of pride conflicted with my struggle of being different. Telling my Montenegrin stories reconnects me to Daignault's (2005) four main modalities of autobiography:

therapeutic (building up and deepening one's self-confidence); literary emphasis (contributing to the development of literature)... objective emphasis (empirical data for analysis and research), [and t]he acousmatic

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<sup>54</sup> I refer to the political tremors in Montenegro regarding nationality and state of church.



[a]s an old practice of ancient Greece that consists of listening while hiding behind a curtain; the listener never sees the one who is speaking. (pp. 4–5)

The qualities of the aforementioned modalities allow me to attend to my writing in a profound way, to reach into the depths of my being and retrieve emotions, thoughts, and understandings I could not otherwise concede. Particularly an acousmatic practice of being behind the pages (instead of a curtain) permits me to engage with this work fully and authentically, trusting that my deep ancestral roots will nourish me—scaffold my growth and nurture my sprouts.

## **The Land of My Descendants**

In the early 1990s, the stench of war in the air was becoming stronger every day. We experienced the rise of all formal Yugoslavs' national feelings of pride, and my mixed heritage pride rose equally. Times were rapidly changing, and I was growing up faster than I was ready. I was scared and lonely. Even surrounded by millions, I was alone. I needed to make meaning of the world around me, to find a way, to start over.

Some people turned to their Ancestral places for the answers about their identity, duties, and purpose. I quickly learned that even though I inherited knowledge of my Ancestors' places through my parents, those were not my places of origin. When I researched Mama's family tree and particularly migration, I learned that our Ancestors settled on that land no more than twenty-five generations ago. They gave that land their sweat and blood, and reciprocally the land fed them. They survived hunger and droughts and two world wars, until the last civil war when they were expelled from their land. In the military bloody operation Storm (Oluja), many of them lost everything—even their lives. One of my aunts never made it to safety—she passed away on the road, leaving her Ancestors' land forever. Her heart gave up, and she passed in the arms of her beloved grandson on the side of the road. We wept, hundreds of kilometers away unable to help, to even bury her properly, as befits—with honour. The others who survived never went back. They have lost everything. My family and the rest of the nation mourned for the loss of their loved ones, the land, and cultural pride. And then came the anger, resentment, need for revenge. I felt that if I allowed myself, my emotions, and my aspirations to become entangled with the national hate, there would be no way out.



I asked myself who I was. Benson (2001) stated that “self involves a combined sense of centredness, agency, and autobiography” (p. 94). I was looking deeply into myself for answers. What is my connection to the land of my Ancestors?

Would I ever till, seed, harvest that soil?

Would I force myself back, against all the soldiers who have now occupied our lands, and take my late aunt there who deserved to be buried in her holy cemetery instead in the strange land on the way to safety?

Would I take my Mama, who had been inconsolably crying, there to make her feel better?

Would it make her feel better?

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (Taylor, 1989, as cited in Benson, 2001, p. 93)

Do I belong on *that* land?

Does that land belong to *me*?

Does that land belong *in* me?

I identify with Milutin, a protagonist in the controversial bestseller *The Book of Milutin*, an illiterate Serbian peasant struggling to understand his role and the role of his family in Serbian political position beginning of the WWII:

Oh my, it's hard to get drawn into a war when-ever someone feels like making you do so. They draw you into something that you don't understand. Indeed. I've listened to many of those scholars speaking about it before. They come home for the summer holidays, and start talking at length about the liberation of all the countries where our brothers live—can you believe that, our brothers, and my own brothers lost their lives for the sake of some “brothers of ours”. (Popović, 1986, pp. 13–14)

Who should I believe?

Who should I follow?



All I know is that my blood lost her blood because of that land, and that is the truth that will always remain. That land belongs to somebody else now, and I prayed that they would love it and care for it as we did. It was too late for me. I needed to let go, unlearn my connection, and learn to be painfully land-free. My story begins with me, and I am unmoored. I am Serbian and Montenegrin, I come from a long line of highlanders, shepherds, and I carry the wisdom of my people in my bones, my flesh, my blood. I do not need to be on the land of my Ancestors to be able to inherit and understand, as I carry with me the whisper of the mountain streams, the scent of the fertile soil, the taste of the deep forests. “Such self-responsibility is a psychological prerequisite for the powerful modern idea that I can, within definite limits, choose what sort of person I want to be” (Benson, 2001, p. 75). That was my new beginning, my new birthplace. I have found the broken pieces of my Face (identity) (Cajete, 1994; Kelly, 2010) and freshly glued them together so I could go on.

As a parting gift, a friend shared what was written in her grandfather’s passport of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as a message to expatriates, circa 1920:

On your journey, behave respectfully and be considerate to everyone, especially towards railway and ship staff, women and children;

Be fully prepared for landing as soon as the ship reaches port. Your undergarment should always be clean, your suit pressed, and your face bright;

In a new country, be serious and proper; obey the laws and authorities; do not speak evil about that country and do not forget about your homeland;

Do not accept humiliating jobs and do not work for less salary than other workers; do not compete but collaborate with other workers, so both, workers and employers, will respect and seek you for employment;

Do not drink and gamble;

Save money and send it to your people in the homeland through the Serbian Post Office Savings bank—your money is completely safe because the state guarantees for it. Don’t trust your money with various unknown bankers, mediators and agents;

If you need any advice, protection, or anything else, contact our consul or emigration envoy;

Learn the language of the country you are in, because your life will be more comfortable, but do not forget your mother tongue; speak to your children



in your native language regardless of whether children are born in the old or a new country;

And now, good luck and goodbye! Know that your fatherland will rejoice in your return.

While those words were not printed in my passport, the wisdom was engraved in my code by my parents, my community, my country, my Ancestors, and as I was leaving, I swore I would make them proud. Davidson (Davidson & Davidson, 2018) explained that profound connection to our heritage:

My father believes that we are “all connected to the past by a thin thread. And when we come together as a group, then those threads form quite a thick rope” Davidson in Steltzer & Davidson, 1994, 99). I learned those songs because I did not want to be the one to weaken the rope that connects us to our Ancestors. This story is one of the threads that I hold. (p. 9)

I too am vigilant with my thread, always. I am always aware of my duties as a thread holder. But, at the time of my leaving, I was not useful to my people and my land and I felt that my thread was wearing and threaten to tear. I needed to leave to strengthen it. To strengthen myself. To be able to be useful again. I hoped that the new land will offer me more threads to hold and that the rope, of which I am a part, will be strong. “I am a traveller on a sacred journey through this one shining day” (Wagamese, 2016, p. 31).

### **Visual Art: Painting [My New] Life**

Revisiting my childhood memories, I remember my time was divided by the school work I was compelled to do and the different artistic activities I loved to do. I doodled, sketched, drew, painted; I knitted and sewed with my mom; I sang in choirs in different languages; I danced in a folkloric dance ensemble. Even though I was born and raised in a city where the westernization began long before my time, and ties with traditional Serbian culture were progressively weaker, I had the opportunity to learn about my culture’s traditional music and dances through my folkloric dance practice. Unfortunately, as I was growing up, I had to cease my artistic activities one by one as the academic work gradually increased. The serene time I spent in arts was replaced by pressure and anxiety. The only joy left was dance. However, even dancing stopped because everything else stopped. My country was shaking and I was losing ground





under my feet. And then I left my native land for another land; a replacement, I thought at the time.

I immigrated to Canada, and while I carried the knowledge of the land I left, I felt I was expected to conform to the cultural and community direction of the new place. Since I was not ready to assimilate fully, I found myself lonely, alone and petrified. I was unable to express myself accurately. In the new land, I was nobody, and had nothing. I was bitter and scared. In the essay “Notes on Exile” Milosz (1994) attested that when the person emigrates “he no longer even exists as a person whose virtues and faults were known to his friends. Nobody knows who he is...his humiliation is proportionate to his pride, and that is perhaps a just punishment.” (p. 37).

Згражам се и гадим свог одраза у  
твојим очима.

Растржем се од туге што сте  
провели читаву вечност гледајући ме.

Али знам да није увек било тако, и  
питама кад је све почело.

Од када ме толико презирете да  
ми је мука од себе?

I am disgusted and nauseous with my  
reflection in your eyes.

Torn with sorrow for you spent the eternity  
looking at me.

But I know it wasn't always like that, and  
I ask when it all started.

Since when you despise me so much that  
I am sick with self?

Oh, how I missed my people—I missed the sky<sup>55</sup>, the water, the ways. I felt like a rejected lover whose heart was going to explode into a million pieces from the unbearable pain. Ceaseless agony. The open sea of sorrow. Deep and thick blackness, nothingness.

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<sup>55</sup> When I returned to Serbia for the first time in eight years, I wept when I saw the well-known sky over Belgrade again.



**Figure 11**

*Entering, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 1994*



Many years later when I read Cajete (1994), I was reassured by the explanation that

[e]thnostress is primarily a result of a psychological response pattern that stems from the disruption of a cultural life and belief system that one cares about deeply. Such a disruption may be abrupt or occur over time and generations. Its initial effects are readily visible, but its long-term effects are many and varied, usually affecting self-image and an understanding of one's place in the world. (p. 190)

I felt as if I was in a dark and cold vacuum-like space where I managed to poke a few small holes to allow a little bit of air to seep in. It was not enough for me to properly breathe, and I was just surviving, relying on the residual homeland air lingering in my lungs. I was terrified of the potentiality to break out of that vacuum and face the new reality in the full picture. I was hibernating comfortably in my misery. I was stuck in my plastic-like vacuum-ous space, cold and scared, barely able to breathe, looking from the inside at the warped images of the outside life, of someone's existence.

**Figure 12**

*Dinner, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 1994*



I felt I was caught in a deadly iron trap,  
vulnerable, waiting to face my fate.

Will I at least be someone's dinner or will I  
vanish unnoticed, unrealized, wasted?

Wagamese (2019) connected the feeling of loneliness to the capacity of being human:

When we feel lonely we allow our rational minds to tell us that we are missing a person or a place. In truth, what we pine for is contact itself—the feeling of being with some person or at some location. Loneliness is a feeling that indicates the absence of a feeling: the special, life-empowering energy of connection that is a hallmark of our human condition. (p. 69)

For my deep grief and darkness, I only found solace in my art. The art was, and still is, a haven for me. A safe place. Benson (2001) beautifully juxtaposed the emotional investment involving art process: “If the pain of deliberately inflicted torture epitomizes negative absorption, then the expansion of self that occurs in aesthetic experiences of art typifies its antithesis, positive absorption” (p. 176). Although art generally represents the positive aesthetic experience, the path that I chose was often uneven, bumpy, and with many unexpected and wrong turns, but also fulfilling, rewarding, and safe. Through that practice, my heart softened a little and I started to see the traces of light, hearing the regular-human-every-day-life chatter, and slowly began to mend myself whole again.

My art helped me imagine what was unimaginable, unattainable, and beyond any possibility—it helped me shape a void. It was coming out of me in the unexpected spouts of divine afflatus. I was meticulously creating something I could not cognize. It was healing me and making me ill at the same time. I knew that I started something that I was certain to complete. However, hope and faith would often leave me because it was hard, and it hurt me. I quit many times, and then continued many times. I was infuriated with my inability to sustain, and euphoric for my ability to maintain. I was looking at it and trying to find meaning, to interpret. I could not fully comprehend my situation and I began accepting that. I observed the strokes—short and long, broad and detailed. I became aware of the movement I made when I created those strokes. I started seeing with my fingers, feeling with my eyes, listening with my images—within it. I did not know that I was painting the picture of my reflection, my reality, my life. With that realization, my



vacuum-ous space started ripping. I inverted and I gave birth to myself. My resistance to the new land slowly subdued, and even though it took me a long time, I finally acknowledged my deep connection to the second city I call home—Vancouver. I recognized my Face has changed and I was finding my Heart (soul, creative self, true passion) (Cajete, 1994; Kelly, 2010).

## The Art of Animation

Standing on an unmoored raft, a punt moving on the flexing, flowing face of a river. It is precarious. I don't know what I am doing. The unknowing, the taut balance, the jolts and the instability spread in widening ripples through all my thoughts. (Brodkey, 1996, as cited in Benson, 2001, p. 101)

### Figure 13

*Unmoored, Mixed Media on Canvas,*  
*Majković, 2016*



When I was twenty-two, I was unmoored and ready to continue my journey. “I was asking, as many do and at that time of my life, what I should be doing with my life?” (Kelly, 2015, p. 7). As many did at these overwhelming turning points in their lives, I too instinctively turned to something comforting, familiar, hopeful—my art. Combining visual arts with my natural inclination to move through the form of dance, I gravitated toward the medium that encompasses both passions—the art of animation. Animation as an art form is widely accepted as a cartoon medium that typically attracts children and youth only and is rarely recognized as a fine art equivalent; however, it centres around a profound quality that is often overlooked.

The word “animation” comes from the Latin word *animus*—rational soul, life, or intelligence, from the root *anima* that means “to blow” or “to breathe,” essentially meaning to give life to something that is un-animatable or stationary. In analytical psychology<sup>56</sup>, the animation is seen as part of one’s psyche—or spirit—that connects with the most profound, most subconscious aspects of the mind. The study of animation as an artistic expression includes deep understanding and mastering of several branches of art, such as visual art—drawing, painting, sculpting, anatomy, costume design, landscapes; auditory art—music and specifically rhythm, speech, and sound effects; performing arts—theatre, dance, object manipulation; and literary art—storytelling. Animation is an art form that consumes the artist entirely, and through the stages of animation, the immersed artist changes with the process as well. My experience was no different. Through the practice of witnessing, imitating, improvising, and bestowing life-like, at first, I become aware, then increasingly appreciative of a complex assembly of facets that formed the final product.

Consequently, I yearned to imitate that process and to become more whole or fully human, attempting “perfection” like one of my creations. I was moving, being moved, animated by the process of animation. That was the period of my rapid development, both as an artist and a human indebted to a precious gift I collected. I still remember the ecstatic moment when I watched my first animated scene. I had many joyful moments in life, but nothing could compare to that one: with the speed of 24

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<sup>56</sup> See Carl Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious.



frames per second, every line, every expression, every thought I carefully placed in every pose of my drawings was coming to life—telling my story.

**Figure 14**

*Water, Digital, Majković, 2000*



One of the most rewarding parts of the animation practice is an occurrence of animated characters coming to life and continuing to tell stories of their creators, and thus to live beyond the perimeters of the screen. In many ways, that was also happening to me—I evolved into the protagonist of my own story, but at that time I did not realize that as I was intimately entangled in the mechanics of the process. I now see it as a necessary period that was part of my long journey and different parts of the puzzle were aligning nicely. For example, my background in dance significantly helped me learn about and enrich my deep understanding of animation, which later informed and strongly influenced my academic work, conceptualizing intrinsic dance and primal animation<sup>57</sup>.

In the long production of an animated film, the animators' eyes are always on the final product mainly because of the complex process that requires a determined and vigorous team. However, it is important to note that it is the profound understanding of the phases and elements in the artistic experience that affect the quality of that product. For that reason, despite the technological advancement, unfortunately we rarely see the animated film productions that include a true-to-life respectful storyline, sensory appeal, and emotional affect so the artist involved can go through the authentic artistic experiences. Instead, productions are rushed to meet the revenue expectancy deadlines, and as such, are easily forgotten and replaced by another rushed production. The artists, except the ones on the top of the production chain, are rarely presented with the opportunities to experience the spirit of art and go beyond the required performance. Dewey (1934) wrote about this beyond-the-obvious occurrence:

The common element in all arts, technological and useful, is organization of energy as means for producing a result. In products that strike us as merely useful, our only concern is with something beyond the thing, and if we are not interested in that ulterior product then we are indifferent to the object itself. (p. 183)

I always lived with and by art. Not excessive fine art only, but everyday craft such as handmade embroideries, clothes, furniture, decorative cakes, paintings, etchings, food. I was surrounded by books, folk music, actively participating in dances, poetry recitals, choirs. I was always perceived as an artist. From my kindergarten-age-performances, to the constant drawing and sketching of my early teenage years, choir singing and dancing, sewing and knitting my own clothes, painting, animation, digital art.

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<sup>57</sup> See Kolo Collects and The Reason We Dance section.





I was always praised for my creativity, talents, skills, my communication through different art mediums. Both my husband and I pass this lifestyle to our daughters reminding them that they, as artists, are always present—inspired by “The Artist is Present” Abramović’s (2010) the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) performative exhibition.

Being an artist for me is equally as important as being a woman, or Serbian-Canadian—it is who I am, and I never felt the need to justify that. However, some communities still live within a structure of exact social expectations and beliefs of how others will and should behave, appear, communicate, and more. Humans and non-humans are neatly packed in compartments with extremely little wiggle space. “A man should act as...”, “A woman should look like...” with a seldom opportunity for personal interpretation of a definition, these are becoming phrases of the past in some progressive communities, however still present in many. Voices echo,

With that short hair, you don't look like a girl.

... But I am a girl... Why do I have to look like one?

If you want to be an artist, you should draw like...

I already am an artist... I just want to learn another technique...

I fear that with a constant need for alignment of neatly packed compartments, we are failing to recognize the true spirit of beauty. As Dewey (1934) illustrated that “esthetic perceptions [that] are necessary ingredients of happiness” (p. 9). However, I would often hear,

Oh, you are wasting your talent

You should do something with your art...

Make money out of it

is another phrase that presumptively kind people directed at me many times in my life.



**Figure 15**

*She, Conté on Paper, Maljković, 1996*



As I advanced in my personal and professional life, I was offered artistic appointments such as graphic designer, digital artist, animator, 3D generalist. I tremendously enjoyed these opportunities, and I was growing and learning, I was also aware that there is more than meets the eye. I found most of these positions suffocated my sense of practicing and experiencing art. While I was satisfied with the opportunities to develop high levels of technical ability. I also noted that other areas of my artistic expression were neglected. It felt like I was polishing one side of a coin, while the other side was corroding. I was losing the ability to imagine “to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet” (Greene, 1995, p. 19). Greene (1995) reminded us of Wallace Steven’s “The Man with the Blue Guitar”:

They said, “you have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.”  
The man replied, “Things as they are  
Are changed upon blue guitar.”  
And they said then, “but play, you must,”  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,  
A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are” (p. 19)

Stalled with nothing to overcome the inertia while losing the ability to even glimpse at unimaginable, I had decided to retract from that path and try to find another way to enter. I was presented with an opportunity to pursue another one of my passions—teaching, and with that recommenced to practice art as an everyday activity. Even though I ceased to actively produce animated pieces, I continued to intentionally and intuitively circle back to the knowledge I grew into while studying this form of art. Through the training I received, I developed the capacity to recognize nuances of human and non-human movements, which greatly informed and enriched my further studies, practice, and everyday life. I entered this stage of my life with the knowledge of a dancer, grew into a dancer-animator, transformed into a dancer-animator-educator, which positioned me well to become a researcher, and later, a scholar. More importantly, along the way, I developed an iterative living practice—always repeating, circling back, returning to the bases. Always remembering my core, my true being.



## Education: New Yearnings, Inspiration, Devoutness

In addition to the teachings from my ethnic and artistic background, I bring knowledge from my educational practice as I enter this research. People I have encountered in my years of teaching and administrative positions, my students and colleagues who are still with me, and I bring our shared experience forward.

Following the years involved in the art industry, I was in my late twenties when a local college offered me to teach an animation course to a group of 14-year-old students during their summer camp. My new colleagues warned that the registered youth were not typically academic; it was most probable that their parents forced them to join; working with unmotivated youth is difficult; and if I survived the first day without crying, it would be a success. I survived, and I loved every minute of it—I found it more creative and challenging than painting or animating. Instead of art supplies, I was working with humans—sharing my knowledge and experience with them, shaping new minds, and creating true pieces of art. I loved the pressure of debates, being in front of the classroom, seemingly controlling the process—I loved my students' surprised expressions when I would surrender that control and let them take over. I especially enjoyed watching my students think, struggle, and then suddenly arrive at a solution. I loved how my students reacted to my teaching when they surprised themselves and exceeded me. Teaching my first course established me as an educator—it hardened me and softened me at the same time. It had awakened something in me that I did not know existed.

I relate to Marshall McLuhan when he was teaching his first class: “It was a pivotal experience. I was confronted with young Americans I was incapable of understanding... I felt an urgent need to study their popular culture in order to get through” (as cited in McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 223). As I taught my first class, I also learned about, from, and because of them, at a fascinating pace. I learned then that teaching is not only transferring knowledge to learners, rather, it involves compassion and a thorough understanding of each student's needs and goals. Perhaps most importantly I asked: what is my role in their personal and educational journeys? After decades of teaching and administrative management, I think of the youth I supported and inspired, and I also think about many that needed more.



Many years forward, I became a seasoned educator and administrator. My enthusiasm did not fade—on the contrary, I felt more determined to better the process, the outcomes, and to offer more support. However, in many ways I was more vulnerable and distrustful than when I first started teaching.

### ***The Orientation Day***

I remember the first Orientation Day when, in my role as an Academic Director, I was invited to welcome the new students. The amphitheatre buzzed with student chatter. I tried to sneak in and observe them for a few minutes before my speech. I have always had high expectations of my students. I aspire to see all of them emerge into the new and exciting studies, thrive during their time with us, graduate, and enter their new lives with poise and make us proud. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

According to the school's retention and attrition reports, at least 10–15 percent of the student body will cease their studies for various reasons such as medical, financial, personal, family, academic, and more. Some of them will return to complete their programs, while some will never do so. Further, based on my observations, the other 85–90 percent, students who persist in their programs, will at some point during their studies struggle in different areas of their lives such as academic, personal, social, family. Unfortunately, we cannot do much for our struggling students. Besides academic help with tutor support and basic counselling, we are unable to continue our care beyond that point. We have limited knowledge, if any, of what happens to them after they leave the campus. Some persistent and extra caring administrators follow up with students, which is discouraged by the school policies and proposed procedures. Concerns flow through my mind:

What will happen to these students after they leave? Will they ever thrive in the world?

If they struggle at first, will they ever come back to complete their studies?

Will they ever find employment in the industry they tried to enter?

What else could we do? What else could have we offered?



While I deeply ponder about these issues, before we could dive into the depths of this problem, we are faced with new groups of enthusiastic incoming students, and I am scheduled to give a speech at another Orientation Day event. I must temporarily place my previous struggling students on hold so I can attend to the new ones. The circle of education repeats itself, and we are eternally captured in that circle without a chance to pause and re-evaluate, re-vision (Kelly, 2019). As always, the process continues with new students who come in, spend time with us while we try to offer the best that we could; some succeed, some struggle and leave, and new students come in again. Earlier I mentioned “caring administrators,” but I am not certain that the term care is the best fit. In their work on care, Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2002) emphasized the view that care is primarily relational, and reciprocity is paramount to a caring relationship. In the book *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*, Noddings (2002) argued that

[t]he key, central to care theory, is this: caring about (or perhaps a sense of justice) must be seen as instrumental in establishing the conditions under which caring-for can flourish. Although the preferred form of caring is caring-for, caring-about can help in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing it. Those who care about others in the justice sense must keep in mind that the objective is to ensure that caring occurs. Caring-about is empty if it does not culminate in caring relations. (p. 23)

I ask: Is our award-winning curricula and excellence in student-centred practice enough to establish conditions that Noddings described?

Alternatively, is our methodology mainly based in the theory where “the rhetoric is too seldom embodied in practice”? (Four Arrows & Miller, 2012, p. 46).

Are we too eagerly responding to the “media-sustained talk of standards and technology than [we] do to the idea of multiple patterns of being and knowing, to regard for cultural differences, to an attentiveness when it comes to voices never listened before”? (Greene, 1997, p. 2).

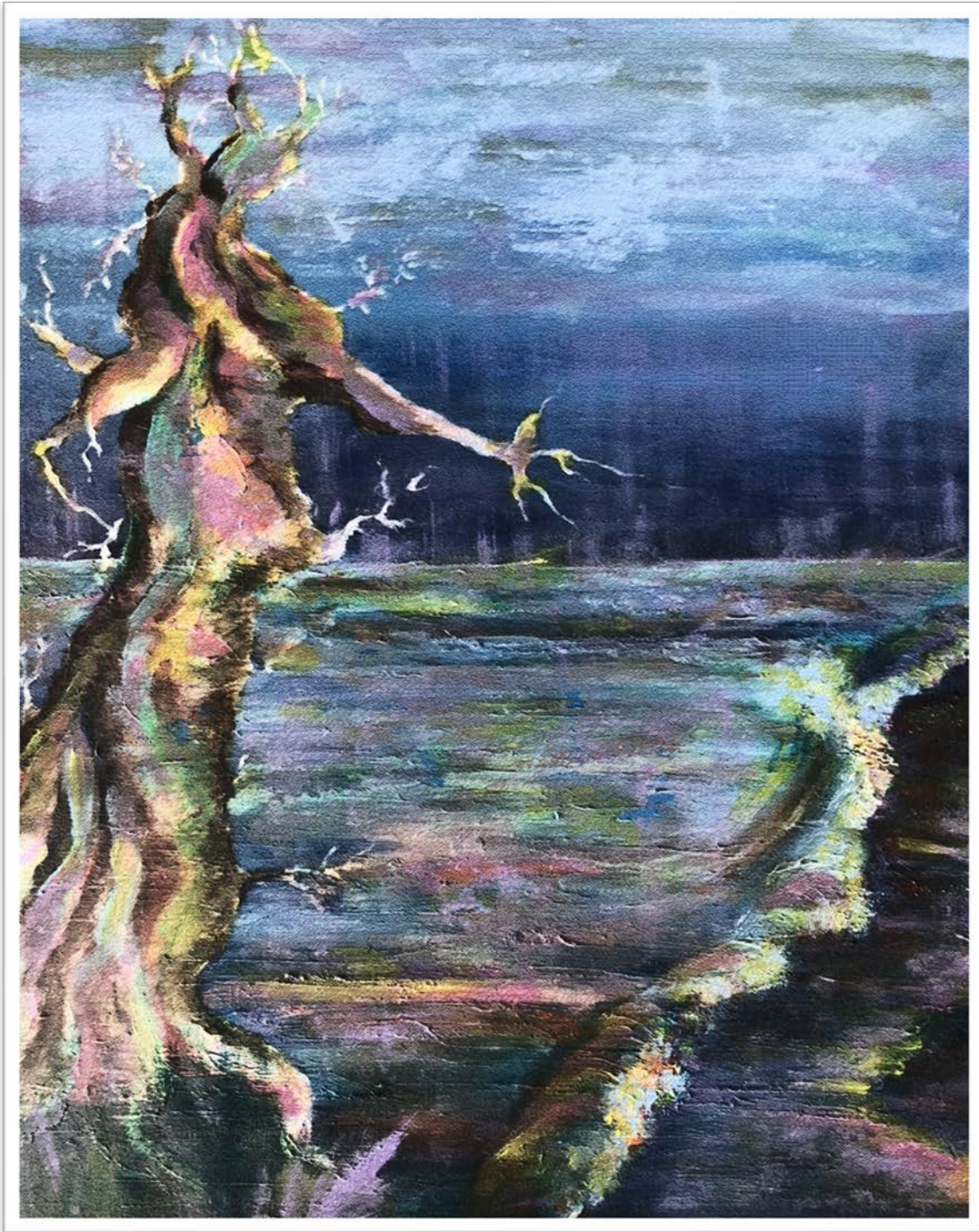
Have we not progressed beyond the R. S. Peters’ “The Educated Man” of the 1960s and the 1970s, “a person who can reach



flawless moral conclusions, but feels no care or concern for others”? (Martin, 1981a, p. 104).

**Figure 16**

*Život (Life), Oil on Canvas, Maljković, 1997*



If we hope to alter and explore our plan for future generations, we need to nourish the capacity to accept our own vulnerability and allow us to enter not-knowing. We need to whole-heartedly begin the search for another way to see the challenge before us. We also need to admit that we have been stalling in our growth for some time, and that time is now ripe to withdraw from our usual methods and attempt to thrive in the liminal space of learning.

In the book *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, Battiste (2013) held the position that

[f]or educators, Aboriginal or not, it is not enough to rebel against injustices unless we also rebel against our lack of imagination and caring. To understand the education, one must love it or care deeply about learning, and accept it as a legitimate process for growth and change. (p. 190)

I found the light in Battiste's words when she spoke about her work in creating the community-based education for students whose experiences in public school had been damaging to their identities, self-concepts, and self-esteem:

I look at myself, I know myself, I know what I am thinking, I love myself, I think well of myself, and I know I am a good person, so that I can look at my friend, I could know my friend, I could listen to my friend, I could love my friend, I could think well of my friend, and I know he is a good person. (Battiste, 1987, as cited in Battiste, 2013, p. 88)

I knew the pieces of my picture were coming together: I felt I had found Foundation (true work, vocation) (Cajete, 1994; Kelly, 2010), and I was eager to learn more.

## **Re-Turn to Dance, Re-Kindle the Harmony**

I first started dancing when I was eight years old. I was inspired by my best friend and wanted to join. However, she stopped shortly after I joined, but I decided to stay and try it out. The group was large, and we could barely fit in the dance studio. I appreciated the size of the group. I was an irreversible introvert, and I welcomed the anonymity that I could enjoy in the large group. I also secretly hoped that this could be the group to which I will continue to belong. There were two choreographers—a man and a woman. I remember the woman being pleasant, often smiling, and supportive. On the other hand, the man seemed to be always semi-irritated, always ready to raise his voice, to clap his





hands hard to get dancers' attention, to single out a dancer; a practice that created additional anxiety in some of us.

Even though my fear of the teacher's humiliation in front of a whole group was overwhelming at times, I discovered that once the music begins, all my worries would disappear. I indulged myself in the then unfamiliar tunes that took me far from the place I was occupying at the time. Even though I was not familiar with the music, its rhythm, or its lyrics, I experienced a sense of nebulous but profound recognition. It felt as if I remembered it vaguely, in pieces that were not connected, but enough to start creating a sense of familiarity. Excited about my newly discovered sensation, I once asked a girl who danced beside me if she recognized the music. She said that her mother was from Kruševac, a town in central Serbia, and that she heard something similar at the wedding party there. She also beamingly added that the wedding lasted three days and had over 300 guests, and that she got separated from her parents four times. I remember being mesmerized by her words. I have never heard about a wedding of those proportions before that. Even though I had never attended a similar wedding, I now know that those large celebrations are not uncommon practices in Serbia. Still, I was intrigued by my familiarity with the music that accompanied our dances.

Interestingly, I have never travelled, nor I had any relations with that part of Serbia. However, somehow the knowledge that hibernated in my epigenetic signature had surfaced with the first chords of the tune. Was I on my way home? Alternatively, was I home already? Many years later, I read Snowber's (2020) words that precisely depicted my love for dance then and now,

A love like this could not be contained in the mind or even the heart. The heart was in the whole body. Dance called to me in this newfound joy. I could not comprehend my experience, but I knew there were visceral experiences by the mystics. (p. 415)

The steps were difficult, the rhythm was challenging to follow, the lyrics to the songs were almost unpronounceable, but somehow, I took pleasure in every minute of my dance practices. Unfortunately, the actual dancing part never lasted long. The approach to teaching folkloric dance that was widely adopted at that time, primarily focused on the theatrical aspect of the traditional dance, not concentrated on a comprehensive understanding of its meaning. Everything was subordinated to choreography. The performance was the final goal of our learning. Even though we were



beginners and it would be years before we would be invited to join the representative—the first ensemble, we were trained from the beginning to dance for the stage and to compete amongst ourselves for a spot on it. The teachers almost completely neglected the learning process and focused only on the finished product.

We spent many hours practicing a single step of the choreography until we all mastered it. Only then were we granted permission to move on and attempt the second step, and so on. The dance season followed the school schedule from September to June, so we spent an entire season preparing one choreography. While all of us were working hard on learning the new steps, I felt then as I am feeling today, that there is much more to it than just the performance. There is a spiritual connection between traditional folkloric dance steps and a native Serbian dancer. While dancing in my preteen years, I had felt in a way that I could not explain then, which I am learning how to articulate that feeling now. One day we were dancing kolo from Stara Planina, a region in eastern Serbia. Our choreographers had taught us a “dry step,” learning a technicality of a step without the accompanying music. Once we learned the step enough, they played the music. It started slow, and we were adjusting our pace to follow the tempo. As the music accelerated, I became unsettled. It brought something that lingered in my body. I did not want to stop dancing and listening to this captivating music. The feeling that I had then when I danced “Šestorka” for the first time was similar to a feeling I had every time I visited my aunt’s village. After many years and many times I danced the same Šestorka, I can identify a feeling when I close my eyes. I see the beautiful scenery of the charming little village that generates the feeling: breathless out of excitement, rushing on a familiar country road, taking my shoes off, cutting across the grass field, and absorbing the moisture of the ground through my feet—I am home. Yoshida (2005) explained a similar phenomenon that she experienced while writing the character for a river, kawa in Japanese:

I felt the Kawa character written in this way came alive, as if flowing in front of me. I encountered the vital life of the Kawa character in this way. Since that [time], the experience of writing Kawa has become totally different for me. The character is no longer an object outside myself, it is something living within. In other words, a loving connection was born between the character and myself. (p. 133)

Similarly to Yoshida’s experience, Šestorka, or any other kolo for that matter, stopped being just a bodily movement but continued to be an embodied spiritual



activity—a timeless and spaceless existence. I saw my reflection in the large dance studio mirror, and I was startled by how different I looked while dancing. For the first time in a long time, I was not embarrassed by my looks. I never connected the feeling I carried in me while dancing and my outer likeness. I looked content and proud, with a lengthened body and a beaming face. At that moment, I understood the profound connection I had with dance and my proto-self (Benson, 2001), and that was a time when I had a glimpse of my real Face (Cajete, 1994; Kelly, 2010). Dance became an essential part of me, something that had helped me form my adolescent identity and then later adult self. It was also something that helped me overcome the most difficult times in my life, something that created a safe place for me to be. I asked myself: Who am I? “Who you are is a function of where you are, where you have been and where you want to be” (Benson 2001, p. 93), and this is my approach to this dissertation as well. I know now, but sensed even then that I knew that I wanted to continue to dance. I want to continue to dance and to belong to this group of likeminded dancers, to absorbing strength from the roots I felt connected to through dancing. Finally, I felt at home. I became part of a group that shared a common passion, and it was effortless to make connections, even for a crowd of flustered preteens. After so many years of remembering my practice, I can now write my memories and share my experience. Royce (2002) endorsed Browning's interesting observation: “Many things I learned in Brazil I learned with my body, and it was only long after that I began to be able to articulate in writing what I had come to understand dancing” (Browning, 1995, as cited in Royce, 2002, p. XXI).

While my connection to dance was always there, also present were my frustrations with not being able to dance as I anticipated. With the style of teaching that Cultural-Artistic Association practiced, we did not have enough time to immerse ourselves in dance. Since the primary focus was a performance-based miniature choreography, we did not develop the appreciation for traditional folk dance and, most of the time, only learned dry steps, a form that is more relating to sport than to the art of dancing. Steiner (1995, 1996) delved into the distinction between practicing gymnastics and dance. He emphasized that gymnastics affects the bodies of athletes and only discursively their souls and spirits, while dancing and specifically eurythmy that Steiner developed, predominantly affects the mental and spiritual. However, exceptionally rare we did just dance and enjoy. Often, our choreographers expected us to be solemn while



dancing, still, and quiet, while they repeatedly showed us precisely how to do the steps. The feeling of content slowly diminished. I was no longer challenged in my learnings and became apathetic and bored (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The repetition of practicing steps deteriorated my enthusiasm for dancing.

Although I felt that the learnings and practices of traditional folkloric dance encompass progressively more profound levels, I was still not in the position to indulge in the mythical aspect of the dance (Kononenko, 2006). I was located at the threshold, at a liminal space not fully endorsed to enter that deeper level, and I have always chased the feeling I experienced at the beginning of my practice. The experience I had in my childhood and youth generated a glimpse that I carried with me, and it was difficult to reconstruct a full picture based on that. The final elusive goal was still too far and out-of-focus.

Many years later, a friend who knew my passion for the traditional folkloric dance invited me to attend a practice with the Gradina group. She promised that I would love it, even though they do not practice for stage performances. Precisely because of that reason, I went. I discovered that, enthusiastic traditional folkloric dance devotee Nada Putnik, taught the old style of folkloric dances. My deep-rooted yearnings immediately resurfaced and, once again, became the driving force for my rekindled passion.

Similarly, Hasebe-Ludt described her mystical experience: “By returning to dancing with the elves in my selves, trusting their unsettling e/motions. I re-entered that strange terrain in between knowing and not knowing, re-connecting with the stranger in me who had made the re-acquaintance with elves” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 88). The style of dancing that we practice at Gradina develops an intrinsic understanding of not only Serbian folkloric dance, but of the vast region of interwoven Balkan’s cultures, which enabled me to go beyond what is easily recognizable, and to connect to the greater representation of my lineage, that in many ways has informed the direction of this inquiry.

Ah, the music starts again. Take my hand, hurry, they are starting kolo...



## Kolo Collects

*Сунце се Дјевојком Жени*

*Дјевојка је сунцу говорила:*

*“Јарко сунце, љепша сам  
од тебе!*

*Ако ли се томе не вјерујеш,  
ти изађи на то равно небо,  
ја ћу изаћ гору на воду.”*

*Када јутро ведро освануло,  
излазило на небо сунашце,  
а дјевојка за гору на воду.*

*Угледа је лијепо сунашце,  
угледа је кроз јелово грање:  
кол’ко се је ашик уџинило,  
трипут је се сунце заиграло,  
па одвуче лијепу дјевојку,  
да је узме себи за љубовицу,  
од ње поста звијезда Даница.  
(*Sunce se djevojkom ženi, n.d.*)*

The Sun Weds a Girl

The girl told the Sun:

“Bright Sun, I am more beautiful  
than you!

If you don't believe me,  
go up to the clear sky,  
and I'll go up to the mountain stream.”

When the bright morning dawned,  
the Sun rushed to the sky,  
and the girl to the mountain stream.

The Sun saw the beautiful girl,  
through the fir branches:  
as much as the man would fall in love,  
the Sun did three times,  
so he drags the beautiful girl,  
to take her for his beloved,  
and she becomes the Morning Star.



*Што више љубави враћаш, више ћеш и примити.*

*The more love you return, the more you will receive. ~ Serbian proverb*

My story of Igranka continues.

## **Igranka, Part II: Community Dances in the Streets**

I found a perfect spot to sit on top of the stairs in a corner between a door that does not open and a simple-looking stone railing. From that place, I can, nearly unnoticed and undisturbed, observe festival guests. The mellow sun shines in the afternoon and more people come outside for another stroll around the church. It seems the second wave of visitors are arriving. The activities will likely quiet down in a couple of hours. Then, everyone will focus on Igranka only.

Volunteers continue to sell goods displayed on the tables set up on the sidewalk. They advertise their products energetically, demonstrate options, advise on alternate uses. This is probably the only opportunity this year to sell the goods, so they work hard on it. I am impressed by the constant influx of enthusiasm and approach to duties.

Two young girls dressed in traditional costumes and opanci<sup>58</sup> run by, chasing each other. I wanted to shout to be careful, but luckily, although unfortunately for the girls, the Club's directress saw them running and with a stern voice scolded them to behave while in costumes. They immediately stopped, looked down, and walked away sneaking looks at each other. I know they will start running as soon as they leave her sight. They will probably run into another parent who will scold them again. I see my girls' folklore teachers hurry from one group of children dressed in the same costumes to another for the last preparations before the afternoon performances. I can relax because neither of my girls perform today, however, tomorrow I will anxiously rush around trying to help prepare young dancers for their acts. The Folklore Club counts over two hundred members ranging from preschool children to veteran ensembles and signifies one of the main Church operations. Also, this festival represents the second most important annual

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<sup>58</sup> In Serbian for traditional peasant shoes worn in Southeastern Europe.



performance so all eyes will be on them. Parents, friends, and other members of extended families will be watching.

I hear someone shout my name and I see my sister wave with her arm extended and pointing to an empty blue plastic chair beside her and my girls. She has found us great seats in the second row in front of the temporarily constructed stage just off the Church Garden. Other chairs appear occupied with summer sweaters, hats, and cloth bags people left in anticipation of the performance. I realize it will start soon, so I started moving toward them.

I see almost the whole club's administrative team line-up beside the stage, except Nada, the treasurer. Olga will later go on the stage to introduce the ensembles, dances, and the performing guests. At the end of the performances, they invite the teachers to the stage and gift them with flowers. I wish this year they would announce the whole team to the community. For most of today's audience, the team is still anonymous, even though they make all this possible. The teachers are front-lined and essential, but only one element in our children's education. The whole team volunteer tirelessly—they probably devote as many hours into the club's operations as they do in their family and work duties. Alas, often unrecognized and unacknowledged.

The music starts and the youngest ensemble enters the stage. Their folklore dance teacher, my friend's teenage daughter Nina, leads the preschool-age boys and girls. They all hold hands and she pulls them towards the centre of the stage. She looks at them while they walk and smiles gently, whispering the last instructions before they start. The audience claps and cheers loudly. They dance and sing a well-liked Serbian tune. They attempt to perform a choreography by dividing in half and start marching in opposite directions, but they get confused and stop. Nina runs toward them. She blushes and tries to organize them but it gets even more confusing. Finally, the music stops and they all run to the edge of the stage and bow. The audience claps and cheers even harder. As they walk off, Nina waves off apologetically. Even though they all look adorable, I empathize with her.

The audience, warmed up by the first group of dancers, cheerfully welcomes the next performers. The following groups present dances and songs from different parts of Serbia. The variety of costumes, hats, hairstyles, jewelry, and even footwear illustrate



the culturally rich South Slavic territories. Different styles of dances, steps, and songs reveal the lifestyle and traditions of these regions. A tremendous amount of knowledge, almost tangible, circulates among all of us present—children and youth on stage, their teachers, elders in community, parents and friends watching the show, neighbours quietly standing further away, and passing bystanders. I look around at the audience. Most people lean forward thrilled by the songs and melodies played. They rhythmically clap in the beat of the music and sing along to the popular folkloric tunes. Some of the people standing on the sidelines dance in place, supporting the performers. Again, I feel content, even though it might appear overbearing and interfering, I love the active participation of Serbian concerts.

The last dance finished and during their last bow, Olga announces the community kolo. Volunteers start swiftly folding the chairs and youth performers blend in with the audience, grasping hands in anticipation for kolo to begin. With a big smile on her face, Olga exclaims into the microphone, “*Serbian Medley!*” and the music starts. Dynamic notes of Poskok overcome the street noise and someone cries in delight. My sister moves to the sidewalk with Ana, and I follow, holding Kalina’s hand. Somebody grabs my hand and pulls me towards kolo. I pull Kalina with me and laugh. She laughs too and we join the dancers. Poskok is a fun and light kolo. It feels almost like a child at play—

*Haj'd povedi veselo naše kolo šareno,  
Momci, cure u kolo,  
Nek se ori veselo! — we all sing and dance.*<sup>59</sup>

I turn around. It feels like our kolo pulsates and swells with every beat and every step. More and more people join, and kolo extends to the intersecting street. Kalina’s friend breaks our hand-hold to join the dance. More girls join as well. Kalina is now far from me, dancing among her friends. I watch them. They glance at each other, nonverbally discussing others around them. Ineffectively stifling their giggles and sassy smiles, they manage to provoke a reaction from another group of kids. Suddenly ignoring the initiated communication, they burst into laughter. With an interest directed

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<sup>59</sup> In Serbian for “Come on, cheerfully lead our happy dance, Boys, girls, step into a circle, Let the song echo merrily.” [my translation].





back to each other, they gleam in the bright orange setting sun. Almost instantaneously they jolt higher and faster into the dance. They laugh again, keeping their secret. They look unreservedly true, complete, in kolo.

## Serbian Medley: Notation and Movement Patterns

Our second kolo is a Serbian Medley consisting of four kolos: Poskok, Ti Momo, Djurdjevka, and Igrale se Delije—light and fun kolos. All four kolos are from the central part of Serbia—Šumadija. Kolos are danced one after another without a break in-between. For faster kolos, or part of kolos, dancers hold hands down, and during the slower parts, hands are held up in a W formation. I selected the Medley as an intro to this section because as it consists of four individual kolos; they all pertain to the four areas of selected scholarship study: holistic education and development, the pedagogy of ceremonies, rituals, and other cultural practices, narodne igre<sup>60</sup>, and the reason we dance.

Serbian Medley kolos have always been the favourite among young people (see Figure 17): they dance without stopping, challenge themselves, each other, modify the steps, the moves, respond to the atmosphere around them, live in the moment, live in kolo, live fully.

### Poskok Kolo

During the slower part of kolo everybody sings:

*Haj'd povedi veselo naše kolo šareno,  
Haj'd povedi veselo naše kolo šareno,  
Momci cure u kolo, Nek se ori veselo.*<sup>61</sup>

The dancers step toward right diagonal centre, arms swing in, hop on R ft. Step on L ft arms swing down to neutral position. Hop on L ft. triple-step<sup>62</sup> starting and finishing on R ft. Repeat the opposite: Step on L ft into the diagonal centre L, arms swing

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<sup>60</sup> In Serbian for folkloric dances.

<sup>61</sup> In Serbian for “Come on, cheerfully lead our happy dance, come on, cheerfully lead our vibrant dance, boys, girls, step into a circle, let the song echoes merrily.” [my translation].

<sup>62</sup> In Serbian for the basic triple-step for many Serbian kolos.



in, hop on L ft. Step on R ft arms swing down to neutral position. Hop on R ft. The triple-step starting and finishing on L ft. The steps repeat four times. Four three-steps in LOD starting on R ft. Arms down and not swinging. All steps repeat until the music stops.

## Ti Momo

During kolo's slower part, men and women take turns singing the following lyrics:

*Ti momo, ti devojko,  
ti moga brata mamiš  
na tvoje gajtan veđe,  
na tvoje oči smeđe.  
Sam se je prevario,  
sam se je namamio  
na moje gajtan veđe,  
na moje oči smeđe.  
na moje lice belo,  
na moje vito telo.*<sup>63</sup>

During the slow music, the dancers hold their hands up in a W position and walk the triple-step start and finish on R ft. They dance in place and face toward the centre, extend L leg, extend R leg, extend L leg. They repeat steps opposite footwork and direction once and all together one more time.

During the fast music, dancers face centre, hold hands down in an opposite V position, and step R ft to R. They move L ft next to R ft, bend both knees, bounce on both feet two times. They repeat three more times. They repeat steps opposite footwork and direction four times. All steps repeat until the music stops.

## Djurdjevka

Dancers hold hands in W position. Steps and singing start with the music:

*Oj devojko, duša moja,  
Šta govori majka tvoja?  
Oće l' tebe meni dati?  
Oće l' mene zetom zvati?  
Ne da mene moja nana,*

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<sup>63</sup> In Serbian for "You maiden, you girl, you are luring my brother, to your thick eyelashes, to your brown eyes; He has fooled himself, he lured himself, to my eyelashes, to my brown eyes, to my white face, to my fit body." [my translation].



*Ne da jos godinu dana,  
Nece mene tebi dati,  
Nece tebe zetom zvati.  
Oli dala il' ne dala,  
Ti se moja uvek zvala.  
Oli dala il' ne dala,  
Ti se moja uvek zvala.*<sup>64</sup>

Step 1: Facing centre, rock forward on R ft into the centre, rock back on L ft. Rock backwards out of centre on R ft, rock forward in place on L ft. Repeat once. Step on R ft in place. Hop on R ft, swinging L ft forward getting ready to repeat the steps with opposite footwork.

Step 2: Facing centre rock forward on L ft into the centre, rock back on R ft. Rock backwards out of centre on L ft, rock forward in place on R ft. Repeat once. Step on L ft in place. Hop on L ft, swinging L ft forward getting ready to repeat the steps with opposite footwork.

Step 3: Repeat Step 1.

Step 4: Travelling LOD: L ft crosses R ft, L ft behind R ft, L ft crosses R ft, L ft behind R ft.

Repeat Steps 1-4 three more times until the song and music ends.

## **Igrale se Delije**

During kolo's slower part everybody sing:

*Igrale se delije  
Nasred zemlje Srbije.  
Sitno kolo do kola,  
Čulo se do Stambola.  
Svira frula is dola,  
Frula moga sokola.  
Čulo se do Stambola,  
Carskog grada ohola.*

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<sup>64</sup> In Serbian for "O girl, my soul, what does your mother say? Will she give you to me? Will she call me her son-in-law? My mother is not giving me go yet, Not for another year, She won't give me to you, She won't call you her son-in-law. Whether she'll give you to me or not, you will always be mine. Whether she'll give you to me or not, you will always be mine." [my translation].



*Igra kolo do kola,  
Ne haje za Stambola.*<sup>65</sup>

Dancers move in LOD, step R ft, arms swing in, hop on R ft, step on L ft, arms swing back, hop on L ft. Run the triple-step starting and finishing on R ft. Move toward the centre, step on L ft, arms swing in, hop on L ft, step backwards on R ft, arms swing back, hop on R ft.

Run opposite LOD the triple-step starting and finishing on L ft. Face centre, hold hands down (not swinging) step on R ft to R. Close L ft next to R ft, bend both knees, bounce on both feet once.

The steps repeat three more times. Opposite footwork repeats and direction once (opposite LOD). All steps repeat until the music stops.

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<sup>65</sup> In Serbian for “Champions are dancing, in the middle of Serbia. Small steps of the dance, echo all the way to Istanbul. The flute is playing, my darling’s flute. It echoes all the way to Istanbul, the evil Ottoman city. Champions are dancing, not caring about Istanbul.” [my translation].



**Figure 17**

*Kolo Igrale se Delije, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 2020*



## Study of the Selected Scholarship (Taking Heed of the Stories Begins)

My inquiry explores possibilities to develop practice-based understandings for participation in cultural activities as a process for holistic development of a person within community and its extension within societies. My specific focus is to position folkloric dance as a manifestation of a holistic way of being. This research is drawing from four seemingly unconnected areas that when weaved together, form the body of knowledge necessary to understand and further explore this idea. Based on that, my study of the selected scholarship is orienting around these four main fields: holistic education and development; the pedagogy of ceremonies, rituals, and other cultural practices, narodne igre (folkloric dances), and the reason we dance. To illustrate the interrelation of these four fields and their coinciding with four main intertwining themes (see Figure 3), I use a four-point kolovrat (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18**

*Selected Scholarship Study Kolovrat*



Entwined through all these areas are Indigenous knowledges and cultural understandings of being human and Indigenous wholistic pedagogy as a frame of reference as it fundamentally relates to the mentioned fields. Since Indigenous cultures span from the ancient times to the present days, they serve as a cultural scaffold and profoundly inform my contemporary context. These areas of focus establish my scholarly foundation and directly inform and impact my study as discussed in the upcoming sections.

Due to the nature of this inquiry, the findings cannot be linear nor understood from one perspective. Instead, the process of exploring this topic is multi-layered and circular. I am engaging in the comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the selected scholarship not only to situate my work in relations to other scholars, but most importantly to respectfully stand in relation to and humbly step upon the foundations they have created and built and to hopefully extend their knowledge and experience. As described in the previous section, I continue to employ literary *métissage* and combine life writing and autobiographical stories within my scholarly writing (Chambers et al., 2008; Chambers et al., 2012; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Kelly, 2012). King (2003) tells us the importance of telling stories:

Did you ever wonder how it is we imagine the world in the way we do, how it is we imagine ourselves, if not through our stories. And in the English-speaking world, nothing could be easier, for we are surrounded by stories, and we can trace these stories back to other stories and from there back to the beginnings of language. For these are our stories, the cornerstones of our culture. (p. 95)

Through the stories, I share my personal and professional experiences that shaped the person I have become, and I position myself in relation to the scholars who have also explored these topics before me. The following sections present the first stage of my pilgrimage. I look for answers through vast landscapes, finding my way through sometimes dense thickets, climbing and descending through mountainous regions. Struggling, enjoying, laughing. Weeping. Hopefully leaving the signposts behind, so others who come after me will have an option to follow in my footsteps.

“When you are moving toward an objective,” said Petrus, “it is very important to pay attention to the road. It is the road that teaches us the best way to get there, and the road enriches us as we walk its length.” (Coelho, 1995, pp. 40–41)



## Holistic Education and Development

Pursuing my inquiry requires me to have a strong conception of the holism. I base my inquiry on the following questions:

What is the wider sphere of ideas regarding holism as a way of thinking about and acting in the world, what are its basic principles and ethos?

Who are the pioneers of holistic thought?

More specifically, what is the history of the idea of holism in education, the historical and contemporary proponents, and the educational and/or existential practices?

From Aristotle who first defined the idea of whole and Smuts who coined the term holism, to contemporary scholars of holistic thought, these philosophers, educators, and practitioners bring the vital knowledge not only to the educational but also existential practices. The view from the shoulders of these educational practitioners empowers us with a comprehensive observation of the current educational landscape, its qualities and issues, as well as promising solutions. Ron Miller (1988), one of the fathers of holistic learning described holistic education as an

expression of profound respect for the deeper, largely unrealized powers of our human nature. Holistic educators see each child as a precious gift, as an embryo of untapped spiritual potential. This attitude is similar to the Quaker belief that there is “that of God in every one”—or at least an unfathomed depth of personality, contained in the soul of every person. (p. 2)

Jack Miller (2005), advocated the view that “holistic education attempts to nurture the development of the whole person. This includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual” (p. 2). These words stand as a starting point for critical inquiry as a way to explore possibilities within the current education climate, to engage with theoretical visions and practical methodologies.





## ***A Brief History (Selected Practitioners)***

The idea of a holistic education is not new—in fact, holistic philosophy dates to the ancient times (Kim, 2005). It was Aristotle who first defined the broad conception of holism in *Metaphysics*. He is attributed with the saying that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ (New World Encyclopedia, 2017). He also observed the world and all beings—human and non-human, as mutually interconnected and interrelated which lays the foundations of the holistic philosophy and educational approach. However, it was not until many centuries later those philosophers and educators recognized the need for wholeness and a holistic approach to life.

While Aristotle was the first to write about wholeness, Jan Christian Smuts, a South African General, statesman, and philosopher was the first who coined the term “holism” in the book *Holism and Evolution*, originally published in 1926. Known to be controversial work at the time, Smuts (1926) recognized the fundamental gaps in knowledge and urged for the reformed concepts of matter, life, and mind. He argued that with the acceptance of Evolution, nineteenth-century science has failed to reconceptualise the idea of matter and therefore create divisions of knowledge. He suggested that “[i]f matter holds the promise and potency of life and mind it is no longer the old matter of the physical materialists” (p. 1). With that he criticized the nineteenth-century science for its domination of causation concepts and general compartmentalisation and called for introduction of surrounding “fields” which bring the natural aspects of fluidity between concepts. I find it important to add that Smuts not only argued for the acquisition of knowledge, rather he called for the development of “new view-points from which to envisage all of our vast accumulated material of knowledge” (p. 2). Although he openly criticized materialists who affirmed the theory of Evolution and he leaned toward spiritualists who denied it, Smuts compromised with the acknowledgement of a creative Evolution. He stated:

The temperature has changed, the view point has shifted, and to-day thoughtful men and women are sincere and convinced evolutionists, without troubling themselves over the dead and forgotten issue of materialism versus spiritualism. We accept the theory of descent, of life from matter, and of the mind from both. (p. 9)

Smuts’ holistic approach laid a foundation to what we recognize as a holistic theory today. In many ways, his work began a paradigm shift away from the mainstream



scholarship's preoccupation with analysis and classification, reconnecting us back to the ancient cultural teachings<sup>66</sup>. This rediscovered path is leading us toward recognition and acceptance of the world around us and in us, that focuses on larger and harmonious relationships with nature and includes "the highest manifestations of the human spirit" (p. 119).

Although holism and holistic worldview have not been part of the Western mainstream educational approach (Miller, 1990; Miller, 1992; Miller, 1999; Miller, 2000; Miller, 2006a; Miller 2006b), it has been a recurring subject not only in educational discourses but rather in science, medicine, psychology, sociology, and more (Miller, 1992). "Holism is a postmodern worldview that has been gaining influence and recognition" (Miller, 1991, p. 53). Given the vast spectrum of topics that holism covers, it is nearly impossible to draw a very straight line to the origins of the holistic thought. Nevertheless, generally Jean Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Friedrich Froebel are recognized as the pioneers of holistic education (Miller, 1991) whose teachings lay the groundwork for contemporary holistic practices. Further, I have also selected three other notable educational radicals of the early twentieth century who further developed the holistic paradigm in education: Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, and Loris Malaguzzi.

Instead of studying and analysing solely their written work, I engage in the process of interpretive biography (Denzin, 2008), and I investigate their biographies seeking the answers to:

Who were the educational practitioners on whose broad shoulders we are standing today? What were their personal struggles, aspirations, hopes?

What were their family situations that made them the pioneers of educational thought whose ideas are still glorified, centuries later?

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<sup>66</sup> See Indigenous Wholistic Theory section.



Why did the holistic thought re-emerge at those specific times, and to what was each of them responding?

I am interested in learning from the stories about them and from them. In the following sections, I gaze into their lives and selected work, and aim to grasp their personas, histories, influences, struggles, to better understand their educational philosophies.

### **Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel**

These three educators lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are considered the “grandfathers” of holistic education.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1712, is known as the least academic of modern philosophers, however, the most influential in many ways (Duignan & Cranston, 2021). Among other books, he wrote *A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755), *The Social Contract* (1762); *Julie or The New Eloise* (1761), *Émile or On education* (1762); and the autobiographical *Confessions*, known to inspire the leaders of the French Revolution and the romantic generation (Benda, 1953). Rousseau understood the interests of the people and also challenged the privileged: “We have physicians, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians and painters in plenty; but no longer a citizen among us” (Benda, 1953 pp. 14–15), a statement which positioned him of the Enlightenment yet against it. Generally, his thoughts that “the arts and sciences have corrupted the simplicity of the citizenry, by engendering the twin evils of waste of time and of luxury (Benda, 1953 p. 14) marked the end of the European Enlightenment period (the Age of Reason). Rousseau is also attributed with raising political and ethical thinking into higher levels, which had a profound impact on people’s way of life.

Rousseau’s mother died in childbirth and he was brought up by his single father in a Spartan style and without female influence (Johnston, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2013). This lack of motherly love and exposure to the strict and impersonal upbringing created a void that later created the capacity for better understanding of children’s needs. Rousseau introduced the expression of emotion instead of polite restraint in his philosophy. As an educator he taught parents to take interest in their children and to raise them with love.



One of Rousseau's most influential work *Émile or On Education* consists of five books: The first book is dedicated to the child Émile, and it covers the period from infancy to five years of age; The second book covers age five to about twelve; The third book covers age twelve to fifteen; The fourth book covers the adolescent period, and finally the fifth book describes Émile's female counterpart, Sophie, as well as Émile's domestic and civic life. One of Rousseau's main arguments is that civilization corrupts the child, and he proposed to remove all unnatural restrains of the classroom and leave a child to be free to learn from its own experience gained from the immediate physical world rather than a teacher to enforce the knowledge. Also, Rousseau's absence of female presence in his early age and his fondness for motherhood is apparent throughout his work, including his description of the ideal mother whose sole purpose is to nurse, educate, and protect her children from the corrupted society. Rousseau (2003) described mothers as tender and anxious and vividly illustrated the importance of a mother's function in a family:

Begin with the mothers; you will be astonished at the changes you will [a]ffect. From this first depravity, all others come in succession. The entire moral order is changed; natural feeling is extinguished in all hearts. Within our homes there is less cheerfulness; the touching sight of a growing family no longer attaches the husband or attracts the attention of strangers (p. 17).

He continued explaining the necessity of a family as a stepping-stone in the progress of the state: "The attractions of home life present the best antidote to bad morals" (p. 18). Throughout his book, Rousseau wrote poetically and positioned the child as the centre of education. In fact, in the book, only Émile has a name, needs, desires, etc. and the mother, nurse, tutor, and father are described ambiguously only in their roles but not their characters. In many ways, his approach was a forerunner to today's student-centred methodology of teaching. For example, Rousseau advised a reader how to best approach a teaching task based on the pupil's (Émile's) age and development:

On this occasion, having watched the sunrise from beginning to end with him, having made him notice the mountains and other neighboring objects on the same side, and allowed him to talk about them just as he pleases, be silent for a few minutes, as if in deep thought, and then say to him, "I think the sun set over there, and now it has risen over here. How can that be so?" Say no more; if he asks questions, do not answer them: speak of something else. Leave him to himself, and he will be certain to think the matter over. (p. 126-127)



For Rousseau, the experience is at the root of all education, and he also placed prominence on the individuality of a learner—namely the learning process rather than the content of a lesson. However, Rousseau’s recognized difficulties of turning theory into praxis: his child-centred approach to an ultimate education even though exhaustive, he frequently described it as an art that is impossible to master or succeed in. Nevertheless, his ideas were later brought into praxis by Pestalozzi and Froebel, and his book may be one of the most important books written, as it laid the foundation for the holistic education of the twentieth century.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, born into an Italian family in Zurich, Switzerland on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1746, was highly motivated by Rousseau and the book *Émile* remained his inspiration throughout his life. Pestalozzi was known as “the milk of human kindness” or the “father of the poor” (Soëtard, 1994, p. 297), but even more than that, Pestalozzi was a thinker, and above all, a passionate practitioner of education.

As a young boy, Pestalozzi often visited his maternal grandfather, a priest. His grandfather took him on his visits to the houses of parishioners and the local schools. For young Pestalozzi, it was shocking to learn the extent of the poverty of peasants living in a rural area. He saw firsthand how little children learned in schools and the effects of employing children in factories and fields. Their distress affected Pestalozzi, and left an impression that later inspired his educational ideas (Silber, 2021).

In the early 1770s, Pestalozzi acquired some land where he took in orphaned and poor children from the neighbourhood and set them to work spinning and weaving cotton, while he was educating them. The idea was the children would pay for their own education while learning at their own pace which would help their emancipation. Unfortunately, in 1780, his experiment in teaching through work encountered obstacles which resulted in bankruptcy and Pestalozzi found himself personally responsible, even though his only goal was to help the less fortunate and to put Rousseau’s eminent educational theory in practice:

Pestalozzi’s basic objective was, as he wrote in his 1774 diary on the education of his son:

Jacob, “to join together again what Rousseau had rent asunder”: freedom and constraint, natural desire and the rule of law wanted by all and for all.



But this same Rousseau had said that this ideal union was bound to break down at the first attempt to put it into practice. (Soëtard, 1994, p. 2)

Nonetheless, Pestalozzi continued his educational endeavor. When Napoleon invaded Switzerland in 1798, and the French directed the Swiss government to open a school for the orphans, Pestalozzi was put in charge. He was again presented with an opportunity to transform his educational theories into praxis. His educational principle was rooted in Rousseau's work where the basis was the importance of training the senses, as "all thinking began with accurate observations of concrete objects" (Kramer, 1977, p. 64). Pestalozzi's methodology included experiential approach such as physical education, making of collections, and field trips.

Pestalozzi was one of those "heart educationalists" for whom teaching children through the heart is as well a part of education as providing them with intellectual knowledge. By "the head, the heart and the hand," children are taken into consideration and regarded as part of a whole being. The "Pestalozzi Method" centers on freedom in independence," involving these [three] elements with a view to achieving the individual's freedom and independence, with the teacher's role being to ensure that the three remain in balance (Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi – The Biography, 2017, para. 5)

Most of Pestalozzi's work centred around reconnecting the whole community by bringing the focus to the unprivileged and vulnerable people of his time, issues that only recently resurfaced in today's mainstream educational systems. Pestalozzi's teaching methods eventually became widely accepted, and most of his principles have been absorbed into contemporary education.

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel was born on April 21, 1782 in Prussia, now Germany. Froebel was four years of age when his mother died. His father, a strict Lutheran pastor, raised Froebel in a religious but unloving household (Manning, 2005). He was a lonely child because his parents could not spend enough time with him and as a result, he formed a youthful connection with nature. This connection, along with his strong Christian faith, formed the basis of his educational philosophy (Curtis, 2020).

Froebel's father suspected that the boy was unintelligent and sent him off to a school for girls, which at the time was less regimented than the boys' institution. Precisely because of that experience, Froebel based some of his methodologies on the playful nature of education that he acquired at the girl's school such as songs, dances, and finger-plays. Despite the difficult beginning, in his early twenties, Froebel moved to



Frankfurt hoping to continue his studies. He was greatly influenced by Pestalozzi and while he was in Frankfurt, he was offered a teaching position at Pestalozzi's new Model School.

Famously, Froebel developed an educational methodology and nearly four decades after he started teaching and introduced "German kindergarten" (children's garden) (Manning, 2005, p. 372) as a concept of structured play which would serve as a foundation of a young child's education. Froebel incorporates Rousseau's and Pestalozzi's beliefs that children are born innocent and in need of care and protection, and in his work "Man in the Period of Earliest Childhood" (1887b), emphasized the importance of play in children's learning:

Play is the highest phase of child development of human development at this period; Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole—of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good. (p. 54-55)

One of Froebel's important contributions to education was his concept of "self-activity" and play as fundamentals in child education. He believed that the teacher's position was not to lecture, rather to inspire children self-expression through play, both in groups and individually. Froebel developed toys, including cubes, spheres, and such that he referred to as "gifts" or "occupations." He envisioned that children learning was stimulated through play activities while accompanied by songs and music, fundamental for many educational techniques in kindergarten and preschool used nowadays (Curtis, 2020).

Lastly, I end this segment with Froebel's words that deeply resonate with today's holistic methodology: "If we would develop man and in him humanity as a whole, we must view him even in the child as a unit and in all his earthly relations" (Froebel & Hailmann, 1887a, p. 36). Many of Froebel's visions became reality, however more importantly, his encouragement on reconnection to nature inspired many future educators who took his work further.

### **Montessori, Steiner, Malaguzzi**

These three educators' practices are considered the most popular forms of holistic education in the twentieth century.



Maria Montessori, born on August 31, 1870 in the town of Chiaravalle, grew up during the process of the Italian Unification or *Risorgimento*—one of the most turbulent political times in modern Italy. In her early age, she displayed admirable qualities of intelligence and wit, and despite her father’s objections, later became the first woman to enroll in the Medical College in Rome.

In her specialization at the Santo Spirito Hospital in Rome, one of her first assignments was to visit the Rome asylums, where she encountered children with intellectual disabilities—so called “feeble-minded children” who were unable to function in society. Montessori “dedicated herself whole-heartedly to this task, advocating the cause of the child (i.e., of man in becoming) throughout her long life” (Montessori, 1976, p. 15). She quickly established herself as a scientist and academic of distinction and in 1907, the first Casa dei Bambini was officially opened, which marks the beginning of her professional work as a pedagogue and an educator.

She was a well-rounded scholar and practitioner and she aimed her methods in that direction as well. Montessori (2015) promoted freedom and individuality in her teaching methods:

The fundamental freedom – the freedom of the individual – is necessary for the evolution of a species for two reasons: (1) it gives individuals infinite possibilities for growth and improvement and constitutes the starting point of man’s complete development; (2) it makes the formation of a society possible, for freedom is the basis of human society. (p. 18)

This urge for freedom, this need of a child to be left alone to figure things on its own Montessori describes is the first level of education. Further, the second level of education is the social organization of an adult. The third level is the preparation of a “human soul for work as the vital function that is the corner-stone of social experience” (p. 27). Finally, the fourth level of education is life itself. Montessori was a true believer in humanity and was passionately concerned with humanizing society. She “inspires us to experiment, to reach for the best, and to challenge students” (Montessori, 2016, p. 71). Montessori (2015) argued that:

Schools do not prepare young people for social life but rather for earning a living. They train young people for a trade or a profession. And all of them exercise their trade or practice their profession like slaves. This really means that we replace true social life with a degrading caricature of it. We cannot keep a society that is threatening to fall to pieces intact with men





whose only training is in a trade that will earn them a living. We need whole men. (p. 26)

Montessori's goal of education was to provide the opportunity for the child's full development to unfold which include the intellectual, physical, emotional, and social aspects (Marshall, 2017). Montessori believed that the systematically prepared environment in which the children can develop freely at their own pace, spontaneously developing their own natural capacities, advancing through manipulation of self-correcting materials designed to stimulate first senses and then cognitive development advancing from perception to intellectual skills is a proper definition of school (Kramer, 1977).

Rudolf Steiner, born on February 27, 1861 in Kraljevec (then Hungary, now Croatia) spent his childhood in many areas of the country because his father Johann was a station master and often transferred for work. Steiner learned to appreciate the beauty of the unspoiled nature of his surroundings, however, he also marveled at the growing power of technology:

I believe that my childhood in such environment was an important influence on my life. For the mechanical aspect of this life engaged my interest in a compelling manner. And I am aware of how again and again these interests cast a shadow over the emotive side of my childish being, which was drawn towards nature, at once so gracious and so vast, into which, for all their enslavement to the mechanical arts, these railway trains always vanished. (Steiner, 1913, as quoted in Hemleben, 1975, p. 12)

Besides being excellent academically, Steiner also displayed strong powers in clairvoyance. Later in his career, in a lecture he gave in Berlin in 1913, Steiner made a reference to an episode he experienced as a child around eight years of age. He described an event in which he communicated with a recently passed relative. He also talked about his decision not to share this incident with anyone in the family, afraid of being ridiculed for his foolishness. However, as it happens in life, the opportunity presented itself: during the time that Steiner was attending the Vienna Polytechnic school, he made an acquaintance with an herb-gatherer man. Even though Steiner never revealed the name of this man who influenced him greatly, this is how he described him:

One could speak to him about the world of spirits as to someone who had had experience of it. He was intensely pious. He was without formal



education. It is true he had read a great many mystical works; but his reading in no way influenced what he had said. The words that he spoke were the emanations of a mental life that bore the marks of elemental creative wisdom. (Steiner, 1913, as quoted in Hemleben, 1975, p. 24)

Rooted in philosophy of freedom, Steiner created anthroposophy “as a spiritual science, as an art, and as a social motivation and his aim was to establish it in human minds and human societies” (Hemleben, 1975, p. 85). He believed that his generation was spiritually blind, but he also believed that it was possible to heal the spiritual blindness. Steiner found the concept of trinity fascinating and fundamental and he argued that a body, soul, and spirit belonged to three world spheres of existence: the body to the physical or natural world; the soul to the intellectual world; and the spirit to the spiritual world (Hemleben, 1975) arguing that the spiritually blind can recognize only the first physical-natural world, while the other two worlds remain invisible. Steiner illustrated that the three worlds, even quite different from one another, are all individually alive and active: if one cannot envision the body separated from the physical world then one, with the healthy mind, cannot envision that sphere without the other two—intellectual and spiritual. “The three worlds are differentiated in and around man on many planes” (Hemleben, 1975, p. 87).

In one of his lectures on Waldorf education, Steiner explained the importance of the spiritual understanding in education which presented the groundwork for his teachings:

[O]ne of the first stages of understanding human beings indicates that people not only have a relationship to the world in the moment, but that they can move themselves back to any age they have passed through since their earthly birth...

You undergo a spiritual metamorphosis through this process. In doing so, you can perceive a second organism in the human being, a more subtle organism we call etheric because it has neither weight nor spatial dimensions...

[Y]ou can recognize an organism is before you and learn to understand that the human being exists in that more subtle time organism in just the same way he or she exists in the spatial organism...

A certain kind of joy occurs at age thirty-five that arises from the interaction that person had as a child with a teacher. What occurred in that etheric body of eight or ten years old, due to the teacher and the instruction given to the child, acts exactly the same way that our treatment of an organ far from the head acts to cure the headache. (Steiner, 1996, pp. 2–3)



Besides the spiritual groundedness, Steiner, in collaboration with Marie Steiner (nee Von Sivers), his second wife, also introduced Eurythmy as another inherent feature of Waldorf education. Eurythmy is “a new art of movement, cultivating body, soul and spirit; a visible form of language and music” (Steiner, 1995, p. 131). Steiner (1996) also described eurythmy as a means of portraying music through physical motions and emotions:

Eurythmy is an art in which people or groups of people express the movements in the depths of human nature. Everything expressed in those movements arises systematically from the activity within the human organism, just as human speech or song does. In eurythmy, no gesture or movement is haphazard. (p. 38)

Since the opening of the first Waldorf school in 1919 until his death in 1925, Steiner was passionately lecturing on Anthroposophy, organized courses and seminars on pedagogy, sciences, mathematics, as well as Therapeutic Eurythmy that continued developing and has been practiced long after his death (Büssing et al., 2007; Ogletree, 1976; Schwab et al., 2011).

Loris Malaguzzi was born on February 23, 1920 in Corregio, which was in Fascist Italy between the two world wars. He later remembered that time of his life as war years that ruined his youth (Edwards et al., 1998), which shaped his passionate determination to provide solid education to the post-war children.

Most of his life Malaguzzi lived in the city of Reggio Emilia, about 70 kilometers outside of Bologna, and spent his early working years as a teacher in public elementary and middle schools (Moss, 2016). Reggio Emilia is a prosperous city with a long tradition of banking, trade, and manufacturing, which dates to Roman times. It is surrounded by rural areas which include many small farms and smallholdings. Reggio has always been an area where social responsibility is taken seriously and where everyone is expected to play a part in the life of the local community (Thornton & Brunton, 2010). In the small village, Villa Cella villagers managed to raise a small amount of money to open a preschool by selling a German tank, a few horses and two abandoned military trucks (Thornton & Brunton, 2010). The Reggio Emilia school project started something that was described as a “municipal school revolution” (Moss, 2016, p. 169) where a number of left-wing administrators decided to assume responsibilities for early childhood



education despite the government's unwillingness to support the project. They were also looking for an alternative to then dominant church schools.

One of the most important aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach is the image of a child. Unlike the conventional education, their belief was aligned with a view of many before them such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Freire to name a few: children are born with many gifts and unless educated to enhance those aptitudes, their natural abilities might be lost. Malaguzzi insisted that Reggio Emilia children were “rich children born with a hundred languages” (Moss, 2016) suggesting that children have many ways of existing in the world and expressing themselves. He also wrote a poem *The Hundred Languages* where he vividly described children ability to communicate past the given boundaries.

Another important aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach is their profound bond with a community. In the book *Understanding Loris Malaguzzi*, Moss (n.d.) described Malaguzzi as a true Reggiano “deeply rooted in his territorio” (p. 10). *Territorio* is so much more than territoria, Moss further explained: it “carries a deep meaning in Italian about local identity and roots, encompassing local traditions, land, foods and wines, the local ways and history, often too the local dialect” (p. 10). Probably that reason—that truly instilled pride and love for the region, helped establish a type of school of open culture: “schools were not just places for children and teachers. They were public spaces, without boundaries, open to their neighbourhoods, welcoming parents, and other citizens, while reaching out into their surrounding neighbourhoods” (Moss, 2016, p. 172).

The important milestones in the holistic development, such as opening of the first Casa Dei Bambini in Italy, establishing the Waldorf School in Germany, and forming the Reggio Emilia approach in the remote village of Villa Cella, have managed to, albeit barely, still direct the pendulum of educational reform toward the holistic methodology. Unfortunately, the world is still entangled with the growing web of rapid economic and technological growth and is still sinking toward bottomless depths of neoliberalism and the global hegemony (Moss, 2016). Sadly, education is also part of that process.

On the other hand, and while still not in the mainstream education, Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia pedagogical methodologies have been widely accepted, and



global interest in this holistic educational approach has continued to grow. Increasingly, we recognize the need to return to the teachings that have focused on a “profound wisdom that we in the modern age have forgotten” (Miller, 1990, p. 4). Even though we are “still in the dungeons of standardized tests, intelligence quotients, classroom management techniques, homogeneous age groupings, and fifty-minute class periods” (Meyer, 2003, p. 124), I recognize that the pendulum is moving.

### ***Contemporary Holistic Education Practitioners***

While the practitioners mentioned above all lived in different times and regions, I recognize that, broadly speaking, most of their methodologies centre around relations with nature and natural approaches to life. I connect these nature-focused and many other approaches Rousseau and others practiced, to the land-based Indigenous teachings<sup>67</sup> that I encountered on this continent. I also connect it to the concepts of Serbian traditional knowledge with which I grew up, and I will discuss it in the upcoming sections. Nevertheless, important to note that all mentioned practitioners responded to the socio-political climates of their respective periods and countries/regions. In many ways, the times in which they lived and the events they encountered, shaped the foundations of their philosophies.

Rousseau’s wholistic thought emerged during the Age of Reason or European Enlightenment, a period when thinkers questioned the authority of religion and believed that reason and science can solve human problems. Recognizing the *reason* might prevail and dominate other elements of humanness, his philosophy was centred on emotions, opening people’s eyes to the beauties of nature, both human and non-human.

Pestalozzi’ response was directed toward the changes brought by the beginning of the industrial revolution and the economic change prompted by the Europe’s sudden population growth. As the populations of many European countries increased between 50 and 100 percent, an extreme poverty increased as well. Pestalozzi dedicated his life to educating the less privileged, focusing not only on training but rather on education that develop the powers of “Head,” “Heart,” and “Hands.”

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<sup>67</sup> See Indigenous Wholistic Theory section.



Inspired by Pestalozzi and Rousseau, Froebel countered the violent yet liberating events of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, such as the French Revolution and movements to abolish slavery, with his educational approaches focusing on the beauty of nature. He referred to children as flowers, which motivated him to introduce a concept of children's garden (kindergarten) as a holistic learning environment.

Steiner mainly responded to the period dominated by the New Imperialist Age, that gained its momentum from economic, military, political, and religious reasons, as well as from the development and acceptance of a new theory—Social Darwinism—that further shaped new levels of political debate which later culminated in WWI. Steiner centred his philosophy on spirituality and education of the whole person.

Montessori lived and worked during the turbulent period caused by the Fascist regime. Times were difficult and unfortunately, the absence of empathy and support toward less privileged children was growing. Montessori focused her studies on the development of the whole person—allowing the child's optimal growth which includes intellectual, physical, emotional, and social aspects, as her educational goal.

Malaguzzi acted in response to the despair—death, devastation, and misery, unleashed by years of atrocities of WWII. In addition to the ruined cities and infrastructure, Europe was left with close to 20 million non-combatant civilians killed in the war. During a period of collective grief, people needed to gather what was left of their families and communities, and with no resources and limited freedom, rebuild their lives. Aiming to provide stability to the post-war children, Malaguzzi was instrumental in developing Reggio Emilia educational philosophy and pedagogy focused on experiential learning in relationship-driven environments.

Despite the variances in personal styles, all mentioned practitioners of educational philosophy had the similar idea of “a profound sense of reverence for the spontaneous, creative life energies that emerges from within the soul of every child” (Miller, 1991, p. 56), which precisely stands as the premise for the holistic education development of the twentieth century onwards. Ron Miller (1991), educator, historian, and activist in holistic, progressive, and alternative educational movements, also the founding editor of the “Holistic Education Review” and “Paths of Learning” journals, informed us that “[t]he holistic paradigm...is neither a simple child-centred education nor



a leftist critique of capitalism; it is a person-centred vision that demands... that social institutions address the deepest needs—spiritual as well as economic—of human beings” (p. 65).

There are many facets of this broad topic described by the scholars researching and practicing holistic methodologies in the last several decades. To best conceptualize it, I selected excerpts of their voices and laced it together into a vibrant and diverse tapestry of holistic education:

“Holism is often defined as a functional, integrated and generalized model of education that focuses on the whole teaching-learning situation, and varies the teaching-learning strategy to meet the needs of the learner, the teacher, and the situation in an effort to attain educational outcomes greater than the sum of its parts” (Kim, 2005, p. 82). “[H]olism calls attention to the existential, archetypal, and physical connections between human life and other life, between humanity and the planet itself, and between humanity and the vast unfolding process of the Cosmos” (Miller, 1992, p. 6). “A basic premise of holistic education is the belief that our lives have a meaning and purpose greater than the mechanistic laws described by science, and greater than the “consensus consciousness” of any one culture” (Miller, 2006a, p. 6). “Holistic education means that we strive to teach the whole person as a human soul which includes mind, body, emotions, and spirit” (Orr, 2005, p. 87). “This includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual. Perhaps the defining aspect of holistic education is in the spiritual” (Miller, 2005, p. 2). “[H]olistic education embraces interconnectedness, ‘a sense of the sacred’ and mind/body/spirit learning” (Four Arrows & Miller, 2012, p. 46). “With respect to learning, wholeness invites us to contemplate it in its integrity – to contemplate it in the truest way we can. Wholeness suggests encompassing the different dimensions of human experience, because experience is perhaps our best teacher” (Lemkow, 2005, p. 17). “Learning how you learn and create, by exploring the way others have approached learning and creating, allows you to establish a relationship to the human enterprise of creation” (Cajete, 1994, p. 198). “Ancient teachers developed thousands of teaching techniques and combined them in highly creative ways, but they never forgot that it was the individual’s own spirit that would guide what’s learned” (Cajete, 2015, p. 15). “Together these [soul/spirit] functions [thinking and understanding, feeling and emotion, active initiative and attention, sense and perception] constitute our most immediate life experience, and they are all involved in our knowledge of the world”



(Sloan, 2005, p. 28). “Beauty arrests the attention so the soul can come into view. It does little for practical life but everything for that which makes human life meaningful and worth living. Shouldn’t education be concerned with these issues, as well as understanding the physical world and getting along in it?” (Moore, 2005, p. 14). “As I now see it, holism involves honouring ourselves by honouring the various more-than-human entities that give us life. Balance comes from that honouring and from holistic balance comes the ability to act in ethically relational ways” (Latremouille et al., 2016, p. 9).

These views often oppose the current educational goals of our dominant culture entirely. Miller (1999) observed that “[o]ur worldview of materialism, individualism, economic growth, and competition has, as its primary goal, the exploitation of the world for economic and technological progress and personal success” (p. 1). In 1990, Ron Miller opened his famous book *What are schools for? Holistic education in American culture* with an alarming statement: “American education is in turmoil” (p. 1). Thirty years and some educational paradigms later mainstream education is still not where it needs to be and it is evident that a holistic approach is not only recommended but is urgently needed.

### ***Indigenous Wholistic Theory***

As I mentioned before, in many ways, holistic methodologies are established on land-based Indigenous teachings (Four Arrows & Miller, 2012), and my exposure to both Eurocentric and Indigenous is interwoven tightly, preventing me to isolate it for proper respect. For that reason, I will stop and acknowledge that interconnectedness at all opportune openings and indicating similarities between holistic and Indigenous teachings. To draw parallels—holistic education strives to develop the whole person, including the mind, body, emotions, and spirit, which closely corresponds to the Indigenous wholistic theory. Absolon (2019) acknowledged that

Indigenous theory is rooted intimately within Indigenous epistemologies, worldviews, cultures, and traditions. Indigenous wholistic theory is wholistic and multi-layered, which encompasses the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical elements of being. We also acknowledge our past, present, and future. By that very nature, we must look at the past and into our future; (p. 23)





In a dialogue about holistic and Indigenous education between Four Arrows and Jack Miller (2012), Four Arrows asked the important question:

If the roots of holistic education are as clearly rooted in the ways of knowing that Indigenous peoples practiced successfully for tens of thousands of years as I assert, should holistic educators not start making this connection explicit in light of the global ecological crises we face on Mother Earth today? (p. 2)

Miller acknowledged:

I believe that holistic education as a practice started with Indigenous peoples; in other words, the original vision of holistic education was an Indigenous one... [and] I would like to start by focusing on three central principles that I believe both Indigenous educators and holistic educators share (p. 2).

Miller further shared that the first principle is interconnectedness of life or *Mitákuye Oyás'ı̄n* (we are all related), a Lakota phrase that encapsulates the spirit of Indigenous education (Cajete, 1994). The second principle is a sense of the sacred, such as the cosmos, the earth, and its inhabitants. And the third principle is developing the whole person—its body, mind, and spirit, and according to both, Four Arrows and Miller, emphasis on spirit. Miller stated that “[t]oday, education focuses almost exclusively on the mind with some lip service to the body. The soul is ignored.” (p. 2), and Four Arrows agreed and added that despite many Indigenous Peoples are sometimes also losing their strength to persevere, “one thing that makes us distinct is that we have managed to ‘walk the talk’ in spite of the terrible barriers faced in doing so over the past millennium.” (p. 3).

Now, how can Eurocentric and other holistic educators integrate these essential principles of interconnectedness, wholeness, and sacredness? Absolon (2019) lays the foundation of Wholistic theory that can easily be adopted in all its fullness to the holistic approach to education:

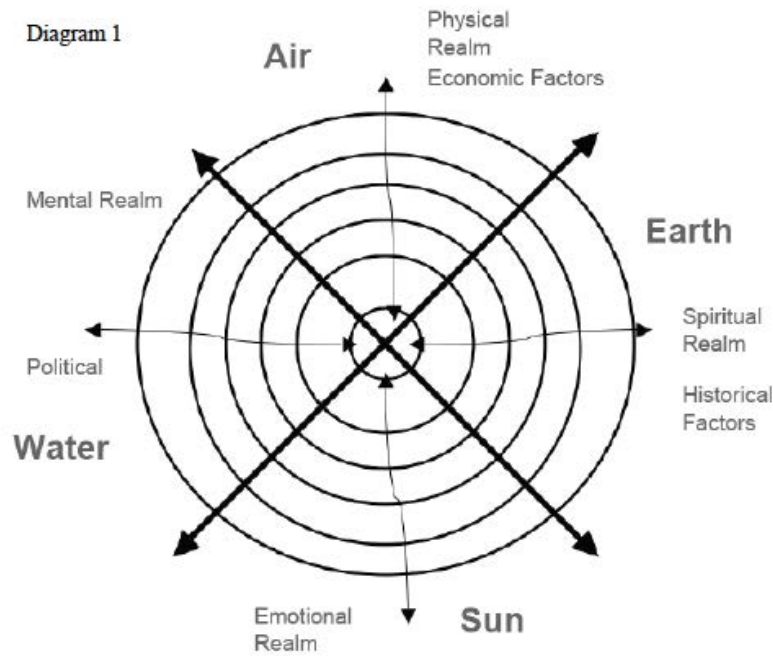
Wholistic theory includes an intermixing and consideration of time and space: the past, present, future; directions, doorways of life; the ecology of creation such as earth, sun, water, air, and all their occupants; and values that retain the balance and harmony of all of the above. (p. 23)



Absolon also included a diagram (see Figure 19) to illustrate the level of all human and non-human connectedness, which creates wholeness and respecting of the sacred.

**Figure 19**

*Reprinted from Absolon, 2019, p. 25. Included with permission*



*Note.* The Diagram 1 of concentric circles represents a level of being and illustrates the reciprocal interconnections of self, individual, family, community, nation, society, and creation. At the centre is a tiny circle representing the self. The next circle represents family, then the community, then the nation, society, and outward to the ecology of creation. Inclusive to all the levels are the infants, youth, young adults, adults, and Elders. Each level of being is affected by the historical, social, political, and economic; and each layer has a spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical element. Indigenous wholism considers the connections and the concept that we are all related begins to make sense as we perceive each aspect in relation to the whole. (Absolon, 2019, p. 25)

This brief stop to honour Absolon’s (2019) introduction to the Indigeogogy is only one of the threads that I hold, and the others are knitted through my work almost



seamlessly. I hold it to keep me on course during my exploration of a wholistic paradigm based on a cyclical and relational practice, concepts closely related to the Serbian traditional knowledge teachings.

### ***Spiritual Attentiveness***

A development of one's spiritual attentiveness represents a vital part of the whole and holistic approach to life. In the essay on meditation and masculinity, Forbes (2005) described his work with "twelve beefy, boisterous, high school male athletes" (p. 153) who have been attending meditation classes as part of the determination to improve their football game. Some of these young men reported that the meditation helped them improve their mental state while playing and to "get in da zone" (p. 153), which appears equivalent to Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) flow—a state of awareness when the level of skill and the level of challenge are aligned, and the person realizes the peak of their experience. Forbes advised that "[t]oday these young men—indeed all young people—need to develop their full capacities to live a whole, meaningful life" (p. 159) and that counselling students along with meditation may be one of the ways to achieve it. Unfortunately, even though it proved to be a successful practice, it is still not widely adopted in mainstream education. Nevertheless, spiritual development should be a critical part of education. Spiritual centredness helps children connect deeply to the self, to a meaningful group, nature, to their lineage, or to a higher power (Kessler, 2005).

To deeper connect with this topic, I tell a portion of a story Four Arrows shared (Four Arrows & Miller, 2012). During a sacred Sun Dance ceremony, he "felt apprehensive about [his] ability to go with limited water in 114 degrees or four days in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho for an *hanblecheyap*" (p. 48). A couple of days later, as his angst grew, a small rodent-like creature appeared and started chewing on tobacco Four Arrows prepared. He later learned that his encounter was with a kangaroo rat, "the only mammal in North America that can go a lifetime without a drink of water" (p. 48). The story displayed not only connectedness to the community but also a moving spirit "with which humans continually communicate" (p. 48). Inspired by this story, I share my own experience of spiritual attentiveness describing one of the most challenging times in my life.



## **Assuring We are Fine or Alternative State of Consciousness**

My Mama passed away in the morning. Sometime before dawn. Around the same time on the day she was born—just when the first sunlight breaks a thick, heavy, long night. At the coldest hour of the day. She passed away in her sleep, not suffering. “A royal death,” she always wished for. When she passed away, it was evening where I live—across the globe, far, far away from her. I was asleep.

A few days preceding, my Mama injured her leg in a fall, but at the time it seemed minor and there was no reason for me to be alarmed. That evening I went to bed reassured by both of my parents that Mama was stable and I should try to rest. However, as I learned the next day, several hours later she quietly slipped out of her body, and she came into my dream. She did not say anything. She appeared in my bedroom and just stood there looking at me. She looked well, wearing her favourite yellow blouse and deep purple/navy pants. She then turned around and went to the kitchen. I followed, amazed at how well she looked and moved despite the injury. I have not seen her move so fast in years. We stood in the kitchen for some time. She hopped and sat on the kitchen counter, and I laughed. I have never seen Mama do that, but I was not very surprised either. She did not say much, and we were just being there, together. It was comfortable, as always. I woke up and phoned my parents’ home. Tata answered and said that Mama was napping. I asked him to wake her up. He could not. His voice was changing, he sounded confused, scared. At that moment, a family friend came to their house to check on Mama. She said they needed to call the ambulance. I knew that they would not be able to bring her back. She was already with me. I then phoned my sister.

For the next day, Mama stayed with me, situated on the upper side of my peripheral vision, just above my forehead. Despite the enormous pain, it was strangely comforting to have Mama visually present. I knew that she was staying behind to make sure we are fine. Even beyond what is Eurocentrally scientifically recognized and accepted, she was still looking after her children. I felt immensely privileged and grateful that I was in the position to receive her love and care during her life and after.

A few days later when I arrived at the funeral home, they opened the casket for me so I could leave my daughters’ letters and drawings. I stuffed my Mama’s favourite puppy toy in her pocket. I smiled while tears were rolling down my face when I saw that



she wore her favourite yellow blouse and deep purple/navy pants. The moving spirit was with me. She was with me. Forever.

Years later, I immediately thought of my Mama when I read Wagamese (2019) explaining the importance of spiritual medicine in such situations.

When we feel lonely we are telling ourselves that we are *out of the loop* and we miss the feeling of being in that specific circle of energy—the loop—we pine for. It is a spiritual malady, and as the elders would say, it requires a spiritual solution. [emphasis in original] (p. 69)

My experience at the time of my mother's passing had not only immensely helped in the long and hard process of grieving for a loss parent (and in my case, my best friend), but rather marked the direction of my consciousness and ability to assertively acknowledge and accept my own identity as well as my understanding and connection to my Ancestors. While contemporary Serbian culture belongs more to the monophasic than polyphasic cultures (Laughlin, 2011a<sup>68</sup>), the remnants of the ancient Serbian/Slavic practices still nowadays allow pockets of cultural communities or families to believe and practice as they did long ago. "Dream experiences, just as waking experiences, inform the society's general system of knowledge about the self and the world—that is, their cosmology—as well as the development of a person's identity" (Laughlin, 2011a, p. 160), even if, as is the case in many cultures now which due to the process of westernization, are only able to peek into the secret and almost forbidden treasury of the past knowledge.

As I continue to explore the alternative state of consciousness (ASC) as potentially one of the channels into spirituality and thus holistic thought (Laughlin, 2020), I am still not certain how to (or even if I should) categorize my experience. Laughlin (2011b) offered a starting definition of a lucid dream: "A dream is lucid if *we are aware within the dream that that we are dreaming and that we are not awake.*" [emphasis in original] (p. 134). However, he further offered that

[t]here is a lot wrong with this definition of lucidity from the anthropological point of point, not the least being its inherent ethnocentricity. It assumes a

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<sup>68</sup> According to Laughlin (2011) monophasic cultures "tend to skew the development of consciousness away from alternative states of consciousness and toward perceptual and cognitive processes oriented to the external world" (p. 159) and polyphasic cultures "value experiences [they] had in the dream life, as well as those had in trance states, meditation states, drug- and ritual-driven visions, etc." (p. 159).



culture in which waking states and dreaming states are distinct, one being associated with active awareness and the other not. (p. 143)

One of the psychological theories of dreaming and lucidity, McManus, Laughlin, and Shearer (1993, as cited in Laughlin, 2011b) discussed is particularly interesting for my work:

We are not saying that dream [states] function as a dialogue between, and reorganization of, internal systems only in polyphasic individuals and cultures. Rather, dream [states] operate to reorganize internal systems whether or not the ego polyphasic. The question is to what extent there is participation by higher cortical processes in all [states] of consciousness. (p. 38)

With that, I wonder what cortical functions were activated to allow the experience of my Mama visiting me in my dream to inform me of her passing and continuing to appear in my awake-state vision for the next day to ensure that we are fine? From the medical perspective, Lawrence (2017) reported that

[b]ased on the research already conducted, we know millions of mentally healthy individuals who come close to death have near-death experiences (NDEs), near-death visits (NDVs), out-of-body experiences (OBEs) not associated with an NDE deathbed communications (DBC), and after-death communications (ADCs), to list the most common occurrences. (p. 486)

Expanding the topic through transpersonal anthropological lens, Laughlin (2011b) offered that

[t]ranspersonal experiences are those "...in which the sense of self or identity extends beyond (*trans*) the personality or personal to encompass wider aspects of community, culture, and even cosmos. Such experiences have been highly valued across cultures and centuries" (Walsh, 2007, p. 5, as cited in Laughlin, 2011b, p. 359)

Lastly, from the spiritual point of view, Hollick (2006) shared that transpersonal "consciousness connects us not only with our immediate environment and our own past, but also with other times and places, other species, and the very cosmos itself." (p. 277). Hollick also endorsed Stanislav Grof, one of the principal developers of transpersonal psychology, noting his position:

[W]e can relive experiences in the womb, and the pain and emotion of our births; witness events from the future as well as from the lives of our human and animal Ancestors; explore mythological realities we never knew



existed; and share the consciousness of other people, animals, plants, and even of inanimate matter. (p. 276)

Hollick furthered Grof's beliefs with his observation that in "rare cases we can experience unity with cosmic Consciousness, whether as awed witness or as the creative principle of the universe itself." (p. 278). There are many more lens through which we can observe and analyse experiences not easily explained within monophasic cultures' perspectives, however I believe that we should not necessarily focus on *how* something happens rather continue to explore *why*. The following excerpt re-centres me on my path of spiritual exploration. Hollick (2006) states that

[w]e are free to co-create our own worldviews; ones that, unlike classical science, are positive and life-affirming. This does not mean we can reject well-established scientific facts and "laws of nature." But it does mean freedom to choose between competing theories and alternative interpretations of them; freedom to make fresh syntheses of scientific and other knowledge; freedom to interpret their meaning for our lives in our own ways; and freedom to bring wisdom to bear in how we apply the findings of science (p. 57)

Lessons learned from the Indigenous wholistic theory and the practitioners of holistic approach teach us that the philosophy of holistic education is entirely possible and socio-economically sustainable. As Montessori and other holistic practitioners insisted, what educators need to understand is that in the very first level of education, children need the freedom to be able to learn. That is not only fundamental physical freedom to move, but also mental and spiritual freedom to make choices, explore opportunities, and take chances. However, in today's paradigm of high competency and hostile competition, it is not easy for educators to advise their young students to examine alternate ways and potentially pursue fewer straight paths to success. Nevertheless, more than that, these young people need to build themselves strong enough to withstand the severe conditions of the unknown routes. Since the education of a whole human may be the only way to help bring this about, we must restore a sense of awe and wonder (Miller, 2007) and instill into our students, that natural curiosity to seek freedom and its true meaning.

I acknowledge my prolonged stay in this landscape as a response to my need to profoundly connect with the theories and teachings I encountered. Allowing enough time, the capacity was formed—as my mentor noted, I stopped being a visitor and instead became an inhabitant of a place in the fullest sense, I long to belong. I found a



resonance that awakened in me ever greater understanding that I share with you, my readers. As I have finished setting the ropes for others to climb, my journey continues.

## **The Pedagogy of Ceremonies, Rituals, and Other Cultural Practices**

Concerned about current environmental, cultural, and social distresses and disease as well as their implications for/of impacts on our educational systems and thus the health of our living practices, I search for ways that address these issues. Wagamese (2019) shared the wisdom he learned from his teachers:

The elders and spiritual people of First Nations recognized that it was a feeling of disconnection that haunted most people. They saw that we as a species become so busy, so involved with the physical act of our living, that we forget it is impossible for us to invoke disconnection. We are so engaged in being that we forget how to simply *be*. So they sought a means to allow us to remember that we are constantly a part of everything. They sought a way to help us reconnect whenever we chose. They sought a path that would lead us always to recognition of the great fact of our physical reality—that everything is energy, including us, and we can never truly be separate.

So the teachers created *ceremony*. [emphasis in original] (p. 71)

Davidson (Davidson & Davidson, 2018) also described the profundity of ceremonial practices:

As I reflected on the ways in which my father had used the potlatch as a form of pedagogy I realized, that without knowing it or intending to, he had used the *sk'ad'a* principles to teach us about Haida ancestral knowledge. Through the preparation and hosting of potlatches and feasts, he had demonstrated that learning emerges from strong relationships, authentic experiences, and from curiosity; that learning occurs through observation, contribution, and recognition and encouraging strengths; and that learning honours the power of the mind, our history and our stories, as well as spirituality and protocol. (p. 68)

Endeavouring to understand how to best hold this inquiry and care for the acquired knowledge, I ask:

Considering the importance of ceremonial, ritual, and other cultural pedagogies, how do we ensure a healthy flow of knowledge?





Even further, how is folkloric dance seen as  
a way of acquiring traditional knowledge?

Before I begin with the subject of “traditional knowledge” and because the current discourse of “epistemology,” “truth,” “knowledge,” or “ways of knowing” is still very active, it is appropriate to address my position on this subject. While I deeply admire scholars who take position that “[a]ll peoples have their own distinct beliefs of what knowledge is and what knowing entails” (Aluli-Meyer, 2008, p. 218) and I generally hold the same point of view, I also respect scholars who are challenging those claims, and therefore it is important to dedicate this introduction to the topic. In the essay “Epistemology as Trope: Uses and Effects of Claims About ‘Ways of Knowing’” Ruitenberg (2012) engaged in “discursive rather than representational view of language” (p. 116) and offered many perspectives on the subject. I chose to reflect on some of the arguments that most resonate with me and my work, while I am aware that those might not be representative of their general position. Ruitenberg, drawing from Peters (1970), posited that the term “knowing” is an achievement word and “‘reading,’ ‘listening,’ ‘rehearsing,’ and many other activities or tasks may be undertaken with the intent that they will lead to knowledge” (p. 104). On the other hand, Ingold (2013) argued that

the information in the book is not, in itself, knowledge. Rather, it opens up a path to knowledge, thanks to its location within a field of practices that is already partially familiar by virtue of previous experience. Only when placed in the context of skills gained through prior experience does information specify a route that is comprehensible and that can practicably be followed, and only a route so specified can lead to knowledge. It is in this sense that all knowledge is founded on skill. (p. 304)

Since the knowledge, rather than the education, is the focus of this section, it is important to note Peters’ (1970) clarification: “The notion ... of being ‘educated’ has become contingently but firmly associated with knowledge and understanding” (p. 46). Peters continued to explain that since we recognize knowledge, which is associated with the word education, to be valuable, we could associate other values with the same concept. Peters conceded that “we” have not done so but “[s]ome people in our culture do, perhaps, put other things under this concept. So their concept of being educated includes things like being clean, tidy, and speaking with a nice accent” (p. 47). While Peters denied including other values under the concept of education, he recognized that it could be otherwise, which opened space for further suggestions. An argument can be



expended for the word knowledge: if other values can be included under the concept of education, then those values could be part of the acquired knowledge, namely the values of ways of being. Further, if values of ways of being are included in the acquired knowledge, whose values are we including? Wouldn't different cultures or subcultures choose to include their values and therefore use that to evaluate education and knowledge?

In the inspirational essay, "The Ideal of the Educated Person," Martin (1981b) drew from Hirst (1972, as cited in Martin, 1981b) who, in her view, suggested the necessity of liberal education which "consists in an initiation into what he calls the forms of knowledge" (p. 5), namely mathematics, physical science, history, human science, literature, fine arts, and philosophy. However, Martin also pointed out how history, for example (one of the forms of knowledge), has defined itself "as the record of the productive processes – man's sphere – of society" (p. 6). Conclusively, she criticized such an approach to the education or acquiring of knowledge and argued that those are male cognitive perspectives and that the reproductive processes of society, typically carried by women, are being excluded. Without going deeper into the stereotypical responsibilities where men are perceived as objective, analytic, and rational, and women are perceived as supportive, empathetic, and sensitive, Martin (1981b) highlighted the flaws from an utterly human perspective:

The Peters-Hirst educated person will have knowledge about others, but will not have been taught to care about their welfare, let alone to act kindly toward them. That person will have some understanding of society, but will not have been taught to feel its injustices or even to be concerned over its fate. The Peters-Hirst educated person is an ivory tower person: a person who can reach flawless moral conclusions, but feels no care or concern for others. (p. 11)

Martin's significant departures from the Peter-Hirst concept of education and forms of knowledge are not only found in association to the reproductive processes, but, if I understand correctly, are also concerned with the absence of inclusive values that should characterize the essentials of developing society. Isn't this enough to justify a departure from hegemony and recognition of the epistemological pluralism?

Tackling a different aspect of the epistemological discourse Ruitenbergh (2012) expressed her concern over the fact that in the English language there is only one term for "knowing" while in some languages such as French, German, or Dutch use two terms



(savoir/connaître, wissen/kennen, weten/kennen). Correspondingly, Serbian terms znati/poznavati function along similar lines as the terms mentioned above, where the term connaître, kennen, kennen, poznavati represent knowing somebody or something more intimately. Ruitenberg (2012) explained the term: “knowing something like the back of one’s hand, for example, or, in French, like one’s pocket: connaître quelque chose comme sa poche” (p. 107), an idiom coincidentally also used in Serbian: poznajem te kao svoj džep. Exploring this topic further and drawing from many scholars such as Edgerton, Rigal, Code, and Kalu, Ruitenberg (2012) proposed that: “[i]n educational contexts, it is important to acknowledge that students can know (in the sense of connaître) certain social or natural phenomena that are discussed in the classroom differently” (p. 108). Even though Ruitenberg concluded the argument by denying that different ways of knowing (connaître/poznavati) do sum up to different epistemologies, the only way to respectfully acknowledge the multidimensionality of society is through recognizing its diverse communities, ways of being, and ways of knowing which parallels to the teachings of holistic education. Holistic education, established on three pillars: balance, inclusion, and connection (Miller, 1990) serves as a way to initiate, nurture, transfer, acquire knowledges not recognized in the mainstream educational landscapes.

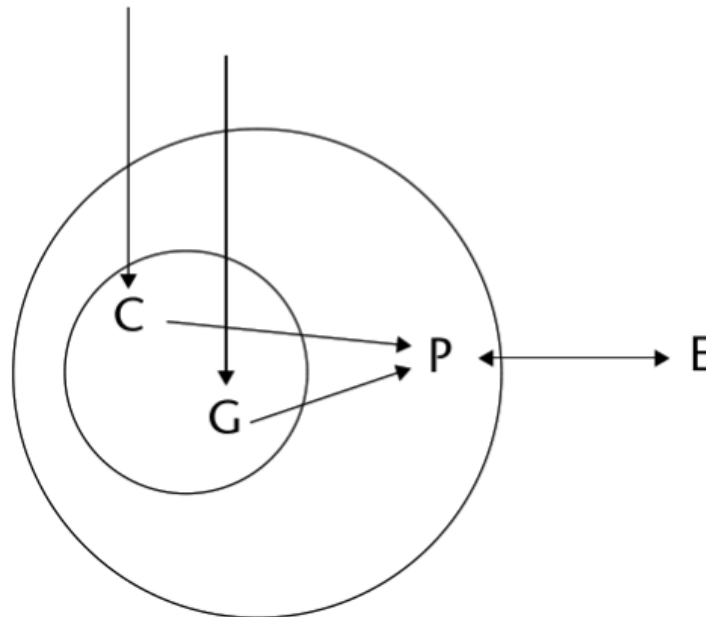
Going back to the basic, I relate to Ingold (2011) who advocated that

[h]uman beings are supremely knowledgeable creatures. That much is obvious. It is not so obvious, however, how they come to know what they do. By all accounts, without such knowledge they would be helpless. Non-human animals seem to know instinctively what to do in any circumstances they would normally encounter. But human beings are apparently born with a deficit, a gap – as Clifford Geertz once put it – ‘between what our body tells us and what we have to know in order to function’ (1973: 50). This gap, Geertz goes on to tell us, is filled by culture, a corpus of information containing all the essential guidelines for a certain way to live, and distinguished by the fact that it is passed on from one generation to the next by some mechanism other than genetic replication. It is, in other words, acquired rather than innate. (p. 156)



**Figure 20**

*Reprinted from Ingold, 2011, p. 158. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc.*



*Note.* The dual inheritance model of genetic and cultural transmission. Both the genotype (G) and the “culture-type” (C) are established through the replication of elements handed down from previous generations. Together, they specify the individual in its essential constitution (inner circle). The phenotype (P, outer circle) is then the expression of this constitution within an environment (E). Adapted from Diener et al. (1980: 12). (p. 158)

Adopting this understanding of the dual inheritance model (see Figure 20), along with the phenotype as the manifestation of both genotype and culture-type within a specific environment, creates an opening to connect to the Indigenous perspective on this topic. Drawing from other scholars such as Ermine and Brandt-Castellano, Kovach (2009) suggested that “Indigenous knowledges are born on relational knowing, from both inner and outer space” (p. 57) and are coming from a multitude of sources, including “traditional teachings, empirical observations, and revelations” (p. 57). This approach covers all aspects crucial for this study: based on the holistic values, covers both theory



and lived experience. Explaining the process of Indigenous methodology, Kovach (2009) pointed out that researchers need to make choices about the knowledge they will privilege. “Privileging tribal epistemology in academic research efforts is easier said than done, but Indigenous researchers are making this choice. Acknowledging these choices and challenges, they are encompassing holism within their research frameworks” (p. 58). Highlighting the importance of Indigenous Knowledge, in the paper “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” Simpson (2014) shared the story about Kwezens she learned from the Elder. She argued that the wisdom in the story directly connects to the Indigenous epistemology, unfortunately not currently supported by educational systems. Simpson warned that if we “do not create a generation of people attached to the land and committed to living out our culturally inherent ways of coming to know, we risk losing what it means to be Nishnaabeg within our own thought systems” (p. 13). According to Simpson this has serious implications for the future generations. She argued that,

[t]he academy does not and cannot provide the proper context for Nishnaabeg intelligence without the full recognition of the system that generates this intelligence and the people that have dedicated their lives to growing, nurturing and living that system – our Elders and knowledge holders. (p. 17)

Supporting this position from a non-Indigenous perspective, Titon (1997) argued that the curricular emphasis (Ruitenberg, 2012) shifts from knowing about to intimately knowing or being. He explained: “I would like to ground musical knowing—that is, knowledge of or about music—in musical being...I think that musical being is a special ontology and that knowing music requires that we start from musical being” (p. 94).

Therefore, the focus of this section is not about proving or disproving epistemological diversity, instead focusing on inquiry that will create the possibility for recognizing and acquiring traditional cultural Serbian knowledge through the means of folkloric dance. To do that I will continue to investigate the cultural traditions through the etymological framework.

### ***Etymological Approach***

I recognize the interchangeability of some of the terms such as ceremony and ritual. Colloquially I use the term ceremony as series of actions proposed by specific



rituals or protocols performed on special occasions e.g., celebrations, and I borrow from the *Concise Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Morris, 2012) for a,

**ritual.** A formal, often religious, set of practices characterized by themes of celebration, renewal, or affirmation. Actions performed in ritual often have symbolic meaning... Ritual can be seen as strengthening the status quo, enforcing the notion that everyday concerns must yield to transcendent ones (or the requirements of their representatives). (p. 219)

While I will address different viewing and/or experience of ceremonies and rituals<sup>69</sup>, since my focus is Serbian folkloric dance, I turn toward specific terminology which largely contributes to the demonstration of our traditional ways.

In Serbian, we almost interchangeably use two terms to describe the dance: ples (ballet, modern, ball dance) and igre (folkloric dance or games). In the first known dictionary of the vernacular Serbian language (Stefanović, 1818) that was collected and written by philologist and linguist Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, there is no entry for ples. However, there is an entry for plesna (step, footprint, foot) and plesnica (sandal, opanak—traditional Serbian footwear) which has the same origin as the term ples. On the other hand, there is an entry for igre, which translates to both dance and play. Further, according to the *Etimologijski rječnik Hrvatskoga ili Srpskoga jezika* (*Dictionnaire etymologique De la langue Croate ou Serbe; The etymological dictionary of the Croatian or Serbian language*) by Petar Skok (1971), a Croatian linguist and onomastics expert, term igra originates from the ancient Slavic term jbgred or jbgрати; Sanskrit meaning is also Ancient Slavic. \* jbgрати meaning “to move, in all probability, in a circle” as a semantic parallel; “Vigorously move,” today “to play,” root \* aig- (reference lit. aikšte “public place”). The absence of the term ples from the vernacular Serbian dictionary, and the presence of the Ancient Slavic term jbgрати, particularly with reference to the public place, suggests the existence of social feature of folk dance as a way of life in early times, which was not associated with the performative feature of a dance or ples.

Further to the definitions aforementioned and in the absence of the particularity of folkloric or traditional dance, the *Concise Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Morris, 2012) offered two more important definitions:

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<sup>69</sup> See Cultural (un)Practices section.



**folklore.** Beliefs, TRADITIONS, and CUSTOMS passed on, usually orally, within a CULTURE. Folklore may be expressed in many ways, for example as proverbs, tales, songs, and rhymes. The term was coined by William J. Thomas in 1846. The study of folklore - from literary and historical perspectives - developed in early-nineteenth-century northern Europe (e.g., Germany, Finland, Britain) and overlaps with the history of anthropology in such areas as popular MYTH-making (for instance as regards NATIONALISM and supposed NATIONAL CHARACTER).

**folkways.** NORMS regarding manners in a particular SOCIETY; ways of ensuring appropriate behaviour at a less consequential level than that of MORES.

Etymologically, according to the *Oxford Dictionary* ("Folklore", n.d.), definition of the word folklore is:

The traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth. A body of popular myths or beliefs relating to a particular place, activity, or group of people". The word Folklore is derived from two words:

1. "Folk" meaning: A people, nation, race, tribe; Old English folk, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch volk and German Volk.
2. "Lore" meaning: The act of teaching; the condition of being taught; instruction, tuition, education. In particularized use: A piece of teaching or instruction; a lesson. Now *arch.* and *dialect.* Phr. †*to set to lore*: to place under instruction, send to school. *at, to the lair (Sc.)*: at or to school.

A body of traditions and knowledge on a subject or held by a particular group, typically passed from person to person by word of mouth; Old English *lār* "instruction," of Germanic origin: related to Dutch *leer*, German *Lehre*, also to learn.

Drawing from these precise definitions, I recognize the traditional folklore as a way of acquiring and building a body of knowledge, collected since the beginning of times, by the ordinary people, unceasingly transferred generationally through multimodal processes including but not limited to storytelling, songs, dances, food preparation, rituals, making of artifacts, clothing, and other handiwork. As such, folklore vividly represents the spiritual and cultural past of the people within one culture, e.g., Serbian people. The term folklore can be used for art that, in established traditional forms, lives in the people of a culture, and, as a special form, is passed down from generation to generation, from the older to the younger. While I use the terms "acquire," "transfer," and "pass" to describe the transmission of knowledge between generations, I am aware of both—rigidity and adaptability of teaching and learning processes. I use these terms



loosely, aiming to explain the intent or the starting point of the process, instead of the final destination or result. Following Ingold's and Hallam's (2007) warning I am careful with "the metaphor of transmission" (p. 6).

In a loose sense we can of course speak of generations passing on their skills and knowledge to successors. There has been a tendency, however, to interpret the metaphor much more literally, as though in the performance of tradition people do not so much emulate their predecessors by copying their actions, as act out, or "convert into behaviour," prototypical schemas that have already been copied into their heads by a prior process of replication. (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 6)

But it is also important to note that, as Ingold (2013) reminded us: "people do not acquire their knowledge ready-made but rather grow into it, through a process that might best be called guided rediscovery" (p. 304). This "guided" (by our Ancestors) "rediscovery" (of their cultural and social practices) or "trail-following" Ingold referred to as "wayfaring" (2007, p. 75; 2013, p. 5). "The wayfarer is continually on the move." (Ingold, 2007, p. 75). "It is in following this path – in their movement along a way of life – that people grow into knowledge" (Ingold, 2013, p. 305). They continually rediscover stories, one after another, and each story takes them further and further into their Ancestors' knowledge.

One of the ways to engage with the stories is through folklore, and with that, to reconstruct the spiritual and cultural past of a culture. Obviously, for a such process, it is important to take into consideration specific regional influences, such as population vitality and demographic heterogeneity, migrations, birth rate and mortality, ethnic conflicts, wars, and occupations, to name a few. Naturally, over the centuries, Serbian folklore has evolved, which potentially affected the "originality" of cultural heritage. Each new generation offered their vision of the world and with that, their vision of the dances which might be seen as improvising. To introduce the discussion in the book *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, Ingold and Hallam (2007) observed that in order to function socially and culturally, people have to improvise. They offer four points about improvisation:

First, it is generative, in the sense that it gives rise to the phenomenal forms of culture as experienced by those who live by them or in accord with them. Second, it is relational, in that it is continually attuned and responsive to the performance of others. Third, it is temporal, meaning that it cannot be collapsed into an instant, or even a series of instants, but embodies a





certain duration. Finally, improvisation is the way we work, not only in the ordinary conduct of our everyday lives, but also in our studied reflections on these lives in fields of art, literature and science. (p. 1)

The engagement with folkloric songs and dances is “the movement of learning in practice” (Ingold, 2013, p. 305), and as such creative improvisation—the way not just to occupy but inhabit the environment in which they live. “To improvise is to follow the ways of the world, as they unfold, ...on a route already travelled. And the aim is not to reach a terminus but to *keep on going*.” [emphasis in original] (Ingold, 2013, p. 305).

Ingold (2013) further shared his example as a practicing cellist playing the same music over and over. And every time he played it would sound a bit different. Because,

the music lives on as an ever-flowing current. Each time I begin to play I am launched once more into the current, through which I have to feel my way – rather as a boatman feels the stream – with no assurance of how things will turn out. It is, at every moment, a risky endeavour. Though one may recover from errors, it is impossible to go back and correct them. I am, when I play, an itinerant, a wayfarer. And like all wayfarers, I have to improvise. (p. 306)

Kolos today and those from fifty years ago, although with the same names and titles, show noticeable differences. The people’s spirit, the strongest force of all ideas in art, is never completely still. The people always create their art, with the ethics, values, beliefs, and special characteristics that relate to their culture and the current state. Ingold and Hallam (2007) argued that “[t]he continuity of tradition is due not to its passive inertia but to its active regeneration - in the tasks of *carrying on*” [emphasis in original] (p. 6). They further explained that

Following a tradition ... is a matter not of replicating a fixed pattern of behaviour, but of *carrying on* from predecessors. Social life is a task, and for those engaged in it the overriding concern is to keep going, rather than coming to a dead end or becoming caught in a loop of ever-repeating cycles. [emphasis in original] (p. 7)

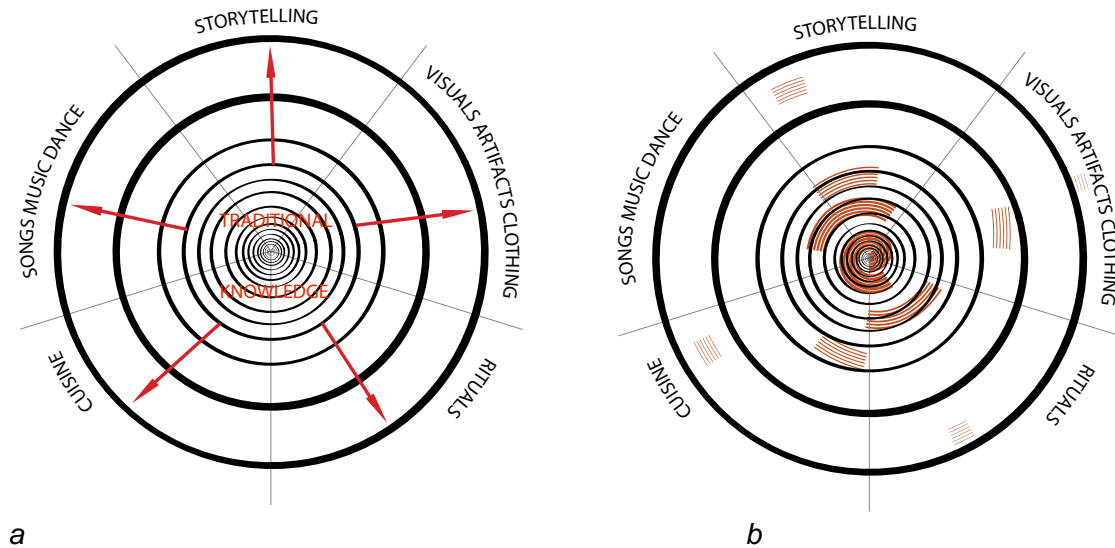
Also, since Serbia is nested within the densely populated Balkan region, it is difficult to isolate only Serbian culture without neighbouring influences. Therefore, it is not surprising that when tracing and reconstructing the traditional cultural past, we can often recognize the variations of songs and dances. For example, the same tune sang in different dialects or even languages or the same lyrics sung in different ways.



Different engagements form ways to acquire different facets of traditional knowledge. For example, learning how to perform a particular dance or a ritual does not mean just learning the performance, but more importantly, learning how to be or exist in this world (Figure 21a).

**Figure 21**

*The Transfer of Traditional Knowledge Through Cultural Teachings: a and b*



The pictorial presentation of my visualization of the traditional cultural processes (Figure 21a, b) not only illustrates the methodology of passing the traditional knowledge through different teachings such as artifacts, clothing, storytelling, cuisine, rituals, songs, and dances, but it also demonstrates how the traditional cultural knowledge is the most evident at its epicentre or its heart, kept by knowledge holders. Through the ripple effect, starting from the heart, new rings begin to spread outward in concentric circles, and the knowledge reverberates far and wide. A person, an organization, or a community, positioned close to the heart of a culture, that is traditional practices, is exposed to the most profound and potentially most meaningful cultural teachings as opposed to the ones further away as illustrated in orange in Figure 21b.

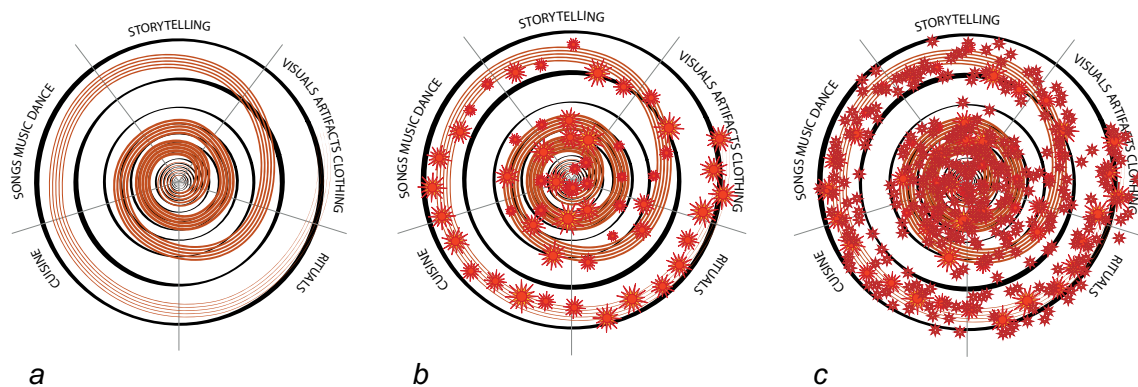
Further, if the offer of cultural teachings increases, the cultural influence intensifies as illustrated in Figure 22a. While still the most evident at the heart, the impact is consistent. As a result of this intensity, more people respond to the changes as seen in Figure 22b. As expected, the more repeated exposure to cultural practices, the



more we can expect increased interest in both frequency and scope as seen in Figure 22c. Important to note that a person born, raised, and living within the particular culture's geographic border, e.g. an urban area in Serbia, might be less exposed to the above described ripple effect of Serbian folk tradition, than a person born, raised and living outside that particular culture's geographic border, e.g. an urban area in Canada, because the latter person might be exposed to the "preserved through time" Serbian folk tradition, simply because sometimes for people in diaspora the culture not only stops evolving, but sometimes moves into reverse direction, going deeper into Ancestors' practices, as they are attempting to balance the contemporary influences. This unfortunate effect might be creating a "holier-than-thou" phenomenon, or in more severe cases, cultural fanaticism.

**Figure 22**

*Cultural Teachings Ripple Effect: a, b, and c*



The effect of culture on a person resonates with Ingold's (2011) dual inheritance model of genetic and cultural transmission: when the genotype (G) and the "culture-type" (C) are handed down to the individual, the phenotype (P) is the expression with the environment (E) (see Figure 20). Simpson (2014) also argued the importance of staying close to the heart of a culture.

I would not exist, writing this paper today, if it were not for the physical survival of several generations of Nishnaabeg women in my family and the heart breaking sacrifices of my Elders who resisted colonial educational practices and live out their commitment to teaching others, the vast majority of the time in the absence of compensation or deep reciprocity, and outside of the provincial education and the post-secondary education system. (p. 14)



The traditional folkloric knowledge is acquired, kept by knowledge holders, and further transferred through teachings about cultures' appropriate behaviors, manners, morals, beliefs, laws of nature, human enforced law, and more. According to Ida Rolf's learning from the Hindu philosophy:

The Hindu culture discovered many thousands of years ago that if you got a relatively good body, you had a reasonable, mild man. So the way a reasonably good body behaved became for them the touchstone for morality. When moral is built from the body's behavior you get a moral structure and behavior which respect the rights and privileges of other individuals. This is a very interesting concept; it has surfaced every once in a while down through the thousands of years that man has been on earth. It went completely out during the more rigid Christian era, when the church began to dictate morals from above rather than morals from within. In doing so, a rigidity came into concept of morals which people are now rebelling against and have been for the last seventy-five years (Rolf, 1995, p. 174).

Learning the traditional cultural way is our "ontological vocation to be more fully human" (Freire, 1993, p. 61), to unconditionally face who we are. Further to that, by learning about and acknowledging our own presence, we place ourselves into this empowering but often convoluted position of this ontological duty. However, groups that are removed from the cultural knowledge pathway either by internal or external forces find themselves dolorous and unable to thrive. The process of healing only starts once the determination to restore the traditional cultural way has begun. Through these processes of becoming or returning, we often find ourselves in the entangled threads of tacit perceptions of pride and shame, belonging, exclusion, attainment, forfeit, particularly for the cultures that suffered extreme socio-political vicissitudes (Hofman, 2009).

A thought-provoking example of such experience of national pride occurred during the bombing of the capital of Serbia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Instead of engaging in a bombing campaign that might be politically unacceptable because of the number of civilian casualties, NATO decided on a deliberate air campaign aimed at destroying Belgrade's infrastructure, Serbia's capital. As a result, the people of Belgrade chose to protect their city with their bodies. At the sight of first threat national inat<sup>70</sup> surfaced and Serbian "irrational defiance manifested as sitting on bridges under shell fire, or running a five kilometer race during an air raid"

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<sup>70</sup> See Inat section.



(Lopičić, 2014, p. 129). Maners' (2006) text, even though its author is not native to the culture, or maybe precisely because of that, beautifully illustrated the time when traditional cultural ritual and particularly dance emerged in one of the darkest moments of modern Serbian history:

Night after night civilians pinned paper targets onto their clothing and stood on the bridges of Belgrade. One of those nights stands out in my memory. As the camera panned through the milling ranks of Belgraders, dressed for a cool night spent standing on a bridge, its gaze fell upon three young women dressed in the typical folk costume of Sumadija, a rural area in north central Serbia. Amidst the drab browns and blacks of coats and jackets, these three young women, linked hand to elbow, stood out as they danced a traditional kolo, a dance form characterized by a curvilinear pattern. Although the video clip was a short one, these young women were clearly good dancers, seemingly perfectly acquainted with the standardized choreography of the stage performance of this dance (body position and linkage, curved path, and so on), and the bystanders obviously approved of both their appearance and their performance. Since these young women were evidently not nineteenth-century rural women dancing together after church on Sunday, nor did they appear to have ridden in on the bus from Sumadija in order to defend the bridges of the capital, one might well ask just what were these young women doing there and what did they represent to those surrounding them? (p. 76)

### ***Selected Nuggets of Serbian Culture***

Often, we define culture as the “commonalities around which a group of people have developed values, norms, family styles, social roles and behaviours, in response to the political, economic and social realities they face” (Christensen, 1989, p. 275). Even though culture can be observed in many different forms such as pop culture, teen culture, workplace culture, but for the purpose of this text, I am focusing on a culture that relates to the people with common ethnic, geographic, and nationhood characteristics.

Naturally, Serbian culture is influenced by its closely positioned neighbours. However, there are a few commonly recognized metaphors, symbols, and units specific to the Serbian cultural expression and therefore significant for deep understanding of its folklore. Typically, they are tightly interwoven in the context, yet, I have selected the most prominent and offer with their renderings.

### **The Song Preserved Us**

A famous Serbian poet, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj (1833–1904) was one of the greatest lyricists of Serbian romanticism. He is known for his patriotic yet contemplative



and reflective poetry inspired and later identified by prominent folkloric motifs. He was well aware of what kept Serbian culture and people alive and thriving and dedicated most of his poetic expression to it. Imbuing folk-style poetry with the idea of cultural values Zmaj dedicated most of his work to children and youth. He strived to fill the gap created by what children could not learn in school and what was avoided publicly at that time due to the politically turbulent years.

In 1881, he wrote a poem *Pesma o Pesmi*<sup>71</sup>, elucidating the primary position poetry, songs, music, and dance hold in Serbian culture. The song as leading impulse is all around us, in all life situations. In some verses, the poet emphasizes the importance of the song, while in others he reinforces its nobility. He describes how when humans came to earth and times were unbearable, they begged the Creator:

We can't live like this!  
We can't be human  
with empty hearts and empty souls.

And the Creator responded with mercy:  
I have condemned your sin,  
And I made it hard,  
But to be so hard,  
I did not want it to be.

Instead,  
Come down, my daughter  
Dearest!

And the daughter came down—and that was  
The song.

Zmaj declared the song both as the meaning of life and the power to direct it. To support when one is in trouble, to empower when needed, to bring closer and reconcile, to comfort in sad and soar in happy moments. The world would not be so beautiful and would not exist without the song. She<sup>72</sup> is our support—always and ever. Toward the

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<sup>71</sup> In Serbian for “The song about songs” [my translation].

<sup>72</sup> The song takes the feminine form in Serbian language.



end of long poem<sup>73</sup> Zmaj expressed the thought that on the most profound level symbolizes the significance of a song for Serbs:

The song preserved us,  
To her, we are grateful.<sup>74</sup>

Serbian people recognize the significance the songs bring—the ability to preserve us, and take every opportunity to engage with it.

### Number Three

The symbolism and the strong presence of the number three can be found in many aspects of Serbian culture. The most common are:

The three-finger salute (see Figure 23a), commonly known as the Serbian salute which originated from the Ancient Serbian/Slavic religion:

1. The hand gesture with three fingers spread (see Figure 23a) signifies Ancient Serbian/Slavic belief in supreme God Rod represented by the trinity of Svarog, Svetovid, and Perun: Svarog as the creator, heaven, and the absolute; Svetovid as the protector, the one who gives insights and enlightenment; and Perun as the destructor, in the sense of purification and creation of the basis for new life, which together symbolize the circle of life.
2. The hand gesture with three fingers close together (see Figure 23b) signifies a Serbian Christian Orthodox perspective representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as a transitioning stage between Ancient Serbian/Slavic three separate gods to the one god of Christianity.
3. As the Christianity spread among Serbs, an even more unique gesture develops assembling three fingers together at the tip. This hand gesture is practiced when crossing oneself in churches and for rituals (see Figure 23c).

Three kisses, alternating each cheek, is the common greeting practices with Serbians.

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<sup>73</sup> In Serbian for 134 lines.

<sup>74</sup> In Serbian “Pesma nas je odrzala, Nojzi hvala.” [my translation].

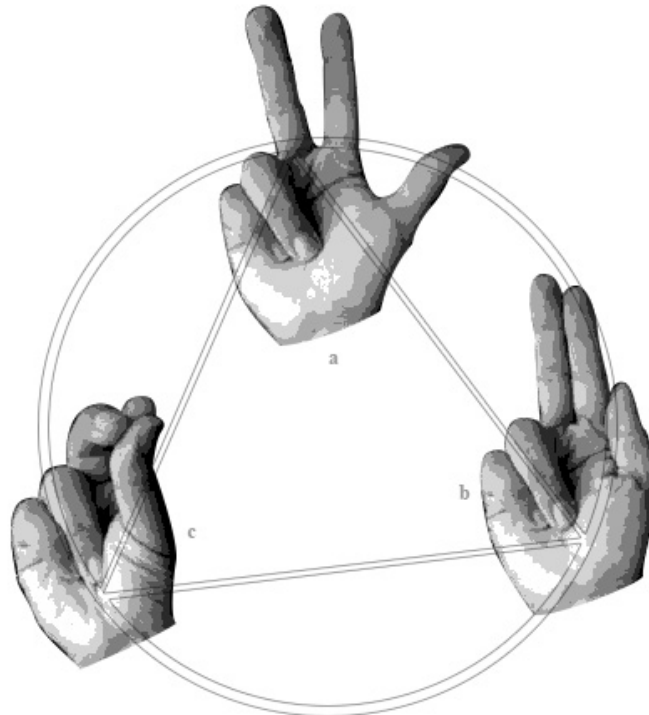


Always present number three in folk literature, such as the king had three sons, or three daughters, a task that needs to be completed in three days, etc.

A triple-step (trokorak) as a basic step in Serbian folkloric dances.

### Figure 23

*Serbian Salute*



### Synchronic Digraphia

Serbian language is one of the rare languages that uses more than one writing system, and currently the only European language with active digraphia. “In Serbia people use both the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet (1814) and Gaj’s Latin alphabet (1835). Both scripts are studied in elementary school as obligatory within the Serbian language courses” (Lopičić, 2014, p. 128) and practically all speakers of Serbian can read and write both scripts.

Additionally, Serbia is situated in a vital place between the East and West, not only geographically, but culturally, spiritually, and politically. This position has manifested





in many unfortunate historical events, such as being the first line of defence in every invasion or world wars; but also, in a positive connotation such as to remain non-aligned, especially during Cold War period.

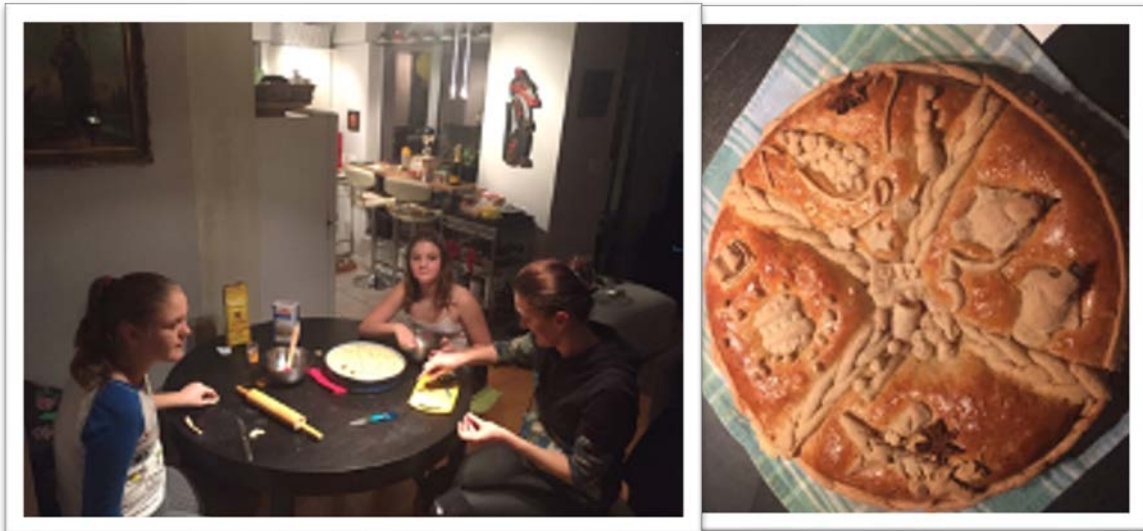
### **Krsna Slava**

Where there is Slava, there is a Serb—Serbian proverb. Among all Slavs and Christian Orthodox nations, Serbs are the only ones who celebrate Slava:

Slava is connected to the times of old Slavic religion, when a cult of Ancestors was very strong. For Slavs, family and its legacy is one of the holiest things in life; and this custom is highly appreciated even today. In order to maintain this legacy and implement it into Christianity, Serbian archbishop St. Sava canonized this ceremony and formed a unique cultural heritage for Serbs. (Živić, 2015)

### **Figure 24**

*The Celebration of Slava Sv. Jovana (Glory for St John)*



In 2014 Slava is inscribed on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2014).

Every year on the eve of St John, January 20<sup>th</sup> of the new Gregorian calendar or January 7<sup>th</sup> of the old Julian calendar, my daughters and I make the Slavski kolač (ritual bread) for the celebration of Slava Sv Jovana (Glory for St John), our family patron (see Figure 24). As an artist, I was able to present it through various artistic mediums, but I chose to present it ethnographically through photography to attempt to convey the



normalness of this moment: this is the way we are and this is what we do—such cultural rituals should not be ethnographic wonders or literary romanticized.

In addition to celebrating Slavias, Serbian people and especially in the rural areas are prominent for their cultural ceremonies, celebrations, or gatherings, such as christenings, weddings, various “rites of passage,” religious holidays, sowings, harvests to name a few. These ceremonies, sometimes as prestigious displays of pride and social status, typically include music, singing, and dancing in kolo. Most often such ceremonies would start early in the day and extend throughout the night, while in some extreme but not too uncommon situations they would extend well into the next day and sometimes run continuously for several days. The songs, music, and dance performed at these ceremonies represent central elements that keep Serbian cultural tradition and religion alive and healthy. Comparably to the function of the blood in the human body, kolo, as a central activity at these ceremonies contains the life of a culture and transforms the sustenance to all major cultural organs such as symbols, language, norms, values, and artifacts (Sociology: Understanding and changing the social world, 2010).

- Symbol is anything that is used to stand for something else. Kolo or circle is one of the most recognized symbols of Serbian culture. Kolo represents tradition, unity, support, and relations.
- Language is a system of words and symbols used to communicate. In addition to singing, communication in kolo is also non-verbal, through listening, observing, reflecting, and contemplating.
- Norms are divided into two types: formal norms and informal. Similar to table manners, skill to dance in kolo is accepted as an informal norm. Further, rituals as established procedures and ceremonies that often mark transitions in the life course both reflect and convey culture’s norms and other elements from one generation to the next. Kolo is often used as a celebratory element within ritualistic practices.
- Values involve judgments of what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable. Kolo holds the knowledge of traditional cultural values and communicates that knowledge through—values transmitted through kolo.



- The artifacts, or material objects, constitute society’s material culture. Traditional wardrobe, headpieces, ornaments, jewelry, footwear and more worn in kolo signify major cultural artifacts.

### ***Cultural (un)Practices***

As mentioned before, while a ritual is typically recognized as culturally consented phenomenon, important to note that Morris (2012) also stated that ritual “can alternatively be read as a site of debate and dissent, with different participants viewing the ritual in different ways” (p. 219). Similarly, Wagamese (2019) warned us that sometimes, unfortunately,

There are many “traditionalists” in every culture, in every community, who, while focused on often superficial proceedings are missing the profound implication of ceremonies, rituals, or other cultural practices. There are many “traditionalists” in every culture, in every community, who, while focused on often superficial proceedings are missing the profound implication of ceremonies, rituals, or other cultural practices. Instead of persistently attempting to fulfil what appears on our minds and our bodies need, we should centre around spiritual attentiveness, allowing our emotional vigor to take charge. Wagamese reminded us that we “are all one energy” and by participating in our cultural traditions we “allow ourselves the opportunity to bring our energy into the loop” (p. 72). In the same vein, as Serbian people, every time when we bake the ceremonial Slava bread (see Figure 24), when we break it, when we cross ourselves (see Figure 23c) and satiate our souls with the scent of sage<sup>75</sup>, we reattune and refocus our energy to where we belong—back to the “loop.”

Wagamese (2019) explained that, “Ceremony evolved so that we could *feel* it. The heart following the head into Creation.” [emphasis in original] (p. 74), and then he added that “Ceremonies are only completed when they are shared” (p. 102).

### **Narodne Igre (Folkloric Dances)**

Continuing my inquiry deep into Serbian cultural practices I ask:

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<sup>75</sup> Serbian traditional burning of fragrant sage for ritual or practical purposes.



Is it possible that folkloric dance can be seen as a particular kind of “community of practice” in which something substantially different is occurring?

What might we say *is* occurring?

Folkloric songs and kolos do not have composers. Although Serbia is not a large country, its folkloric songs and kolos are very diverse in rhythm, steps, ways of dancing, music, as well as in terms of traditional wardrobe and ritual regalia. The most typical and widespread and at the same time the oldest representatives of kolos are Kokonješte, Moravac, and Žikino kolo, recorded by Serbian anthropologist and ethnologist Milan Đ. Milićević around 1876.

While Milićević was the first one to begin collecting traditional cultural heritage, it was the Janković sisters who established ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology in Serbia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were the first researchers in Serbia who were fully dedicated to recording, collecting, and studying folkloric dances—kolos. Sisters Ljubica (1894–1974) and Danica (1898–1960) Janković, from an early childhood age, were interested in folkloric art and specifically dances. After completing their studies of Yugoslav literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, the Janković sisters took jobs as language teachers in the early 1920s. Even though they have begun with the field work around 1925, their professional ethnochoreological work was established in the early 1930s. The Janković sisters have disclosed their research to the public in 1934, and published their first book in 1936 (Janković & Janković, 1936), and in the next almost forty years, eight more (Janković & Janković, 1937; 1939; 1948; 1949; 1951; 1952; 1964; 1972). They have worked on the collected material together; however, the last two books were published after Danica’s death in 1960. In total, they included more than 900 dances in this valuable collection of folkloric art, which they collected directly from knowledge holders who acquired that knowledge from their elders, gray heads, and kept the knowledge, so they can pass it to the next generation.

As previously established, a typical form of kolo is dancing in a circle as a chain of interconnected dancers that move in a circular, and less often in a curved (the formation of eight) line. Sometimes, dancers dance in a straight line or in two opposite rows with the direction of movement left and right, forward and backward. Individual



dancing or dancing in pairs is rare in the central parts of Serbia. The dances have been constantly improved, refined, and changed through the centuries, until they have reached their present forms.

It is believed that dancing in a circle, among other symbolic correspondences, mimics human conception of space in architecture. The first shelters for people in the Balkans had circular bases—when the first people came out of caves, they made cone-shaped mud houses that provided them with the similar safety as caves. The formation of a closed circle—kolo, is a simple, but at the same time is an ideal shape, because all dancers perform the same steps and movements, and are positioned in the same way. The dancers can come in and out of kolo at any time without changing kolo formation. More importantly, the dancers of all skill levels can join kolo at any time, without interrupting other more skillful dancers.

By dancing in kolo, the Ancient Serbian/Slavic people believed that the Slavic gods will be merciful and provide them with vitality, well-being, health, many children, and progress in the community. The people believed that the Slavic gods like to watch energetic movements, swaying, turning in rhythm, and other specific steps, so the Ancient Serbs/Slavs chose to celebrate and turn toward the sun during dancing. For the whole community, the folkloric music had an imperative function. Every melody, song, and dance had its purpose, and as such, each had its own attributive determinants that indicated the occasion in which the songs and dances were performed. The songs and dances were divided into two groups:

a) folkloric songs for work and everyday life: all forms of seasonal work in the field, gathering, picking, plowing, sawing, herding cattle, or domestic jobs such as songs for spinning the wool, cooking, etc. These songs have the function of social communication.

b) folk songs and dances for the family or community ceremonies: Christmas, Lazarics, Djurdjevdan, Dodol, childbirth, weddings etc. These dances are very old dances with roots in pagan rites for fertility, rain, or represent traces to ancient ceremonial dances for specific occasions such as birth, wedding, death, victory in battle, success in hunting, or any other rituals such as rites of passage. Also, as part of various



ceremonies, sorrowful and joyful, and in some forms, as epic songs or in rituals, songs carry the knowledge related to religious or morality values and beliefs.

As mentioned before, because of the proximity of nations and cultures on the densely populated Balkans, the classifications of folkloric dances for each nation and ethnic area is difficult, if not impossible. Since all recorded information on dance phenomena belong to relatively recent history, grouping collected dance material can be done only by studious analysis and comparison with historical, cultural, and artistic events, following the chronicle of Serbian people in different historical eras. Even then, it would be difficult to suggest the exact dates and years of when specific dances originated. Therefore, for the purpose of my research, while I orient toward Serbian folkloric dances—kolos, with which I am most familiar, I will also include the other traditional cultural practices of neighbouring Balkan regions.

### ***Communication in Dance***

Most of the dance literature reflects the dichotomy between the “art dance” and the “folk dance.” “The distinction actually serves little purpose, and it disappears altogether when one considers dance as an aspect of human behavior” (Royce, 2002, p. 5). Unfortunately, there is no consensus between those who study one form or the other. Dance is essentially an aesthetic activity that often serves social, cultural, ritual, or religious functions to name a few. However, dance could also serve as a medium for communication.

My friend, a native Mandarin speaker, explains why she is having a hard time properly pronouncing some words in English: “I have a Chinese-language tongue muscle, so some sounds are not possible for me to pronounce. Simply my tongue has a hard time learning.” Her thoughts on her body’s limits remind me of my limitations as a dancer. The muscles in my body, my mind, heart, and soul are sometimes not adapted to the new moves, and I am not able to learn. Despite my long-term practice and profound knowledge of Balkan dances, occasionally learning new, outside of my familiar region dances, could feel as I am learning a new language and having a hard time pronouncing some words.

Am I not “fluent” in East Serbia dances equally as in the Šumadija region of Central Serbia?



Is it only its rhythm that feels so foreign or is there something more beyond it?

What is the concept behind this intriguing inquiry?

Bloch (1974) suggested that body movements and therefore dance is representative of different groups: "As with speech, the formalization of body movement implies ever-growing control of choice of sequences of movement, and when this has occurred completely, we have dance. We therefore find dance as well as formalized body movements typical of religion" (p. 72). Although I am not looking at dance illustrative of religious groups, I am interested in looking at only smaller South Slavic region dance tradition. Whereas the larger Southern Slavic group has very distinguishable music, body movements, patterns, we recognize that each of the regions that are part of that larger group has its own very distinctive culture and therefore behaviors that are part of that. For example, Blacking (1969) discussed the phenomenon that is evident in each culture:

Every culture has its own rhythm, in the sense that conscious experience is ordered into cycles of seasonal change, physical growth, economic enterprise, genealogical depth or width, life and afterlife, political succession, or any other recurring features which are given significance. (p. 37)

One of the noticeable differences in the cultures, which seem subtle to the observers outside of the South Slavic circle and very obvious to its peoples, is the actual rhythm or tempo of their traditional songs and dances. That could be intrinsically linked to my understanding of the type of rhythm that Blacking discussed in a sense that one region's general musical tempo depends on the rhythm of the significant features of their culture, such as nomadic or settled lifestyles, farming or hunting, seasonal changes, types of the foods consumed and more. From the beginning of times, these significant features and their rhythms were recorded orally in the forms of storytelling and songs, as well as in the patterned body movements in the forms of dances and rituals. Some versions of these dances and rituals with accompanying songs were preserved until nowadays, and in some cases, the songs were either not recorded or not part of the dance/ritual, so we are left with non-linguistic records.



Regardless of the linguistic element, dance was always present as an essential and omnipresent feature of human social life. One of the aspects that dance carries is that non-linguistic communication representative of a larger group, such as religion or culture, as well as a smaller group, such as a village or region. Bloch (1974) compared bodily to verbal communications, and he finds dance equally restrictive as in language: “Messages carried by the language of the body also become ossified, predictable, and repeated from one action to the next, rather than recombined as in everyday situations when they can convey a great variety of messages” (p. 72). The idea that I am emphasizing here is that regardless of the evident restrictions of the body language, dance is a form used to convey the messages likely carried by the culture of the particular group. Bloch further asserted that since the start of the use of dance in this form in this case, conversion from a free-form to an organized pattern we could recognize the loss of dialectic quality: “The implications of this transformation from ordinary bodily control to dance are the same as they are for language; argument and bargaining with bodily movements are replaced by fixed, repeated, fused messages” (p. 72).

Even though these messages are apparent to an experienced eye, they can be subtle to a novice researcher, particularly without the previous contact with the culture. The prominence of how to best apprehend these messages becomes evident once we juxtapose dances from the neighbouring regions. In their studies, Stanimirović and Mutavdžić (2012, 2014) compared the metrical and rhythmical structures of dancing form from the South Slavic, Balkan region neighbouring countries Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria. They found that despite the proximity of the areas selected for the study, there are recognizable differences between the dancing structures. For example, dances from Serbia are characterized by its simple musical and dancing meter, while the dances from North Macedonia and Bulgaria are “consisted of complex musical meter and both symmetric and asymmetric construction” (p. 260). It should be noted that while the sample number is relatively low and less than ten dances per area were analysed, the sample selected consists of the most popular and typical dances. Since the dances from their neighbouring regions diverge in both the metrical and rhythmical structures, could we understand that the messages conveyed are different and are anticipated for a different audience, such as the one “fluent” in that particular body language?





Differences between the dances become even more apparent in the practical aspect of the research. The dance that I practice today is precisely the type of the dance that a researcher and a dance being (Titon, 1997) could hope for, but, despite my long history of dance, it was not always like that. I danced since I can remember. I joined the folk dance Cultural-Artistic Association Branko Krsmanović ensemble when I was a teenager. Being a popular teenager in the eighties and nineties in the east European country meant listening to the prevalent “new wave music” that came from the West and behaving in that manner. Unfortunately for me, it did not include taking part in the national traditional cultural customs, dance, and music. Growing up in the big city in a socialist country also meant looking forward, going in the direction of the progress, and not turning back and particularly not toward the concealed nationalistic past.

The political situation in then Yugoslavia changed drastically after WWII war when the new national identity changed practically overnight. After the fall of Nazi Germany, several south Slav nations were joined together in the new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. That period also marked the beginning of the end of the authentic participation in the traditional cultural customs. Hofman (2011) wrote about this period, and the “complex and contradictory experiences of socialism” (p. 2) observed through the lens of a group of women involved in the preservation of traditional cultural heritage. The women portrayed in this study were born between 1914 and 1950 in the area of Niško Polje in southeastern Serbia. They belonged to the last generation of women who actively participated in traditional customs, but were also the protagonists of important changes in Serbian rural society, and its discourses and practices. Their active involvement with amateur groups began during socialist times and they performed on stage at the events called Village Gatherings that were established in southeastern Serbia in the early 1970s (p. 3).

While the rural part of Serbia participated in the traditional cultural customs, songs, and dances, in the urban areas the preservation of the national heritage was implemented through a different methodology. Established by the management of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of Serbia, the National Ensemble of Folk Dances and Songs of Serbia<sup>76</sup> the “Kolo” began its activities in spring 1948. Just a few months later the Kolo “had its premiere on the stage of the National Theatre in Belgrade,

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<sup>76</sup> Then Yugoslavia.



accompanied by the orchestra of the Belgrade Opera and the tamburitza orchestra of Radio Belgrade” (Kolo, 2018, para. 2). The Kolo ensemble’s first leader Olga Skovran presented her vision in Kolo’s mission aiming:

to show traditional folk dance on the stage by developing it in the sense of and in line with contemporary demands of performing arts, as well as for traditional dance to start communicating in a new, fresh artistic language – fusing the past with the present. (para. 1)

In her approach, Skovran emulated a Russian style of folkloric dance stage adaptation and began to develop the unique form of miniature choreographies as a new direction. Over the years many ethnologists and ethnomusicologists as well world renowned ethnochoreologists Ljubica and Danica Janković (Janković, 1952) worked with the Kolo on its artistic expression. To this day, the concept of miniature choreographies remained the Kolo’s primary art form, which in many ways departed from the traditional cultural dance connotation. Shortly after, Kolo’s remarkable success, all other Cultural-Artistic Associations started mimicking the ensemble’s approach and offered similar versions of the newly developed form. The practice of native style dancing remained popular mainly in villages and rural areas typically during festivities such as childbirth celebrations, weddings, or national holidays, while it became scarce for the city folk. By the late eighties, the new form of performing and teaching was widely adopted. Many generations were exposed to this style of folk dancing, and I was one of them.

Important to note that it is vital for a folkloric dance not be choreographed, but rather that the steps emerge from the dancers in the most possible innate way. There is a certain quality in dancing when steps are not repeatedly rehearsed. In the choreographed dancing, dancers perform identically to one another without having an opportunity to interpret and process the movements with the accompanied music internally. In un-choreographed dances, even though the process is reactive and heuristic, the steps emerge naturally to the dancers and aligned with their gender, origin, ethnicity, upbringing, and similar qualities they are able to improvise as they see fit. After all, we should keep in mind that,

[I]ike any other performing art, dance is essentially ephemeral, existing only at the time of its performance. It can never be properly recorded or preserved, since the way in which dancers interpret a work—their styles, technical abilities, and physical appearance—always change the work each time it is performed. (Dance, 2018)



## Ćef

Another tremendously important aspect of Balkan dances and communication through dance is the notion of ćef or merak (Bosnian: *ćeif*; Bulgarian: *kef*; Turkish: *keyif*; Greek: *kefi*; Arabic: *kaif*). Difficult to explain this phenomenon, ćef can be seen as a desire, a fetish, or a whim. The spirit of joy, passion, euphoria, enthusiasm. An action or activity we enjoy. Sometimes ćef can be described as, *we are doing something we want. It can bother others, irritate them. It doesn't matter, it's a pleasure for us. That's our ćef.* Also “[t]he concept of ćef (or keyif, kefi, qejf, etc.) is found among many groups in the Balkans, and has parallels throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East” (Marković, 2017, p. 162). Folklorist Caraveli (1985) explained it as “a state of mirth and heightened emotion” (p. 262). Dance anthropologist Grau (2016) depicted it as a “complex phenomenon...said to be delicate or fragile and easy to destroy” (p. 14). Ćef is not always joyful and weeping is often expected of its true state (Caraveli, 1985; Grau, 2016). It signifies desire for something, longing, lust, pleasure, enjoyment, pleasant mood, and in rare occasions a heightened feeling of sadness, sorrow, depression.

Ćef is a highly social experience where individual participation in pleasurable activities ideally breaks down interpersonal barriers and fosters a celebratory atmosphere at events. Ćef arises in the right context through a convergence of good company, food and alcohol consumption, and music and dancing. In Vranje<sup>77</sup> people also discuss the pleasures of ćef in terms of merak (“passion” in Turkish), often using merak and ćef interchangeably. Good music and exceptional performances are praised as *meraklijsko/-a*, evaluated in terms of their potential to fulfill the merak of listeners. Merak also applies to an individual’s express desire to have such experiences, their “passionate pursuit” of good music and dancing. (Marković, 2017, pp. 162–163)

Some would argue that ćef can be seen as a source of life. Although not necessarily described as ćef, I mythopoetically understood the following excerpt that Wagamese (2019) generously shared, as an appreciation of a deeply-rooted instinct that makes us who we are.

Coyote laughed. “Desire, you say? What do you know of desire?”

“It’s a heart song,” Ernestina [a field mouse] said. “It comes out of you all rich and pure and you don’t know how it ever got inside of you. It stuns you and you can’t help but follow where it leads you.”

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<sup>77</sup> Southern Serbia.



“Why, that’s very wise,” Coyote said. “When the full moon rises over the lip of the world I find a song in me like that and I just have to lean my head back and sing it. It’s how I became Coyote.” (p. 116)

For many, ćef or merak is healing. While experiencing ćef, people reach the level of joy or happiness they describe as rejuvenating. Potentially related to ćef, for the Kung people from the Kalahari Desert, “kia” or an enhancement of their consciousness is experienced while dancing. They say that “kia comes from activation of an energy that they call num...The cause of kia—the activated num—is said to boil fiercely within the person” (Katz, 1982, p. 41). In some ways similar to the kia phenomenon, even as mostly positive, it is sometimes challenging to go through ćef. The celebrated Serbian singer Zdravko Čolić (2006) described in his song how experiencing ćef/merak goes from blazing and burning to falling in love and singing, but overall living a full life. Here is an excerpt:

Merak is to blaze and burn  
to fix and then break again  
Merak is to sing, darling  
Even when we grieve.

Merak is when we fall in love unhappily  
My people, and drink so clumsily  
Merak for me what is not for you  
Merak is my life.

Oh, who doesn't know what merak is,  
they didn't try anything.<sup>78</sup>

However, while kolos and music are the most powerful instruments for experiencing ćef, for many ćef or merak represents the moving force, the desire for life. In those cases, ćef

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<sup>78</sup> “Merak mi je dok žarimo, palimo  
popravimo pa poslije da kvarimo  
merak mi je da pjevam, dušo  
kad mi se tuguje.  
Merak ti je kad zavoliš nesretno  
ljudi moji, pa popiješ nespretno  
merak mi je što tebi nije  
merak moj zivot je.  
A, e, ko ne zna šta merak je,  
a, e, taj nije probao sve.” [my translation].



or merak is experienced not only during specific events, rather as a way of life. People (mostly men) who engage fully and live in a heightened ćef-like life style are called meraklije.

Exploring pristine nature of Stara Planina<sup>79</sup>, journalist Jovan Memedović (2021) conducted an interview with an unexpected “meraklija”—a 36-year-old Aleksandar Manić, a shepherd on Stara Planina, who even though after completing his master's degree in Archaeology and received job offers in the European Union countries, did not leave Serbia because his roots are “very strong.” He explained the connection between merak and herding sheep:

*Some shepherds characterize their work as merak. Some as an invocation. Some as a lifelong study as it is in the thousand-year-old Stara Planina folk tradition. Merak—my grandfather used to tell me that sheep used to be kept here a lot, almost every house had a herd. They all kept sheep, but not were all meraklije. Merak is important. Merak, says grandfather, holds the soul of a person in the grave for 40 days after they complete their earthly journey. I don't think merak can be learned, that it is a gift. For us shepherds, it practically means that the shepherd takes such good care of the herd such as he takes them to the best pasture, chooses the special bells that have a special sound, a special rattle, takes special care of them in a way to give him pleasure—to fill the soul with joy. That is merak.*

As shepherd Manić mentioned, ćef or merak cannot be learned or even fully explained for those who did not have pleasure to experience it. Instructing readers how to engage with his *The Contemplative Brain* book, Laughlin (2020) noted:

If you are already a contemplative, then many of the things I say will be transparent to you—you've been there, done that. If you have never attempted to mediate, to perform a phenomenological reduction, then the issue will remain conceptual and there will be a limit to how far you can understand what I intend to say. (p. 22)

In a very similar way, some of my readers will engage with the idea of ćef conceptually and some contemplatively.

One way to connect with ćef on a deeper level is to consider Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of optimal experience or flow. As previously established, when the level

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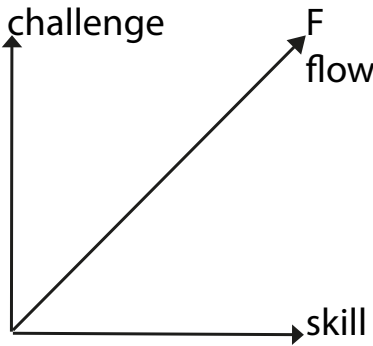
<sup>79</sup> In Serbian for “Old Mountain.” The Balkan Mountains range in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula.



of skill and the level of challenge are properly attuned, a person reaches the state of mind in the peak of the experience, or is in a flow (see Figure 25).

**Figure 25**

*My explanation of optimal experience or flow based on Csikszentmihalyi's model (1997, p. 31)*



Combining Csikszentmihalyi's flow model with Ingold's dual inheritance model, supposedly the person, based on their genotype, is already capable of achieving the flow state of mind, if combined with the specific cultural influence and within the specific environment, the person is then in the proper position to experience *ćef* (as a higher state of experience) or even *kia*<sup>80</sup> (as even higher or healing state of consciousness) (see Figure 26).

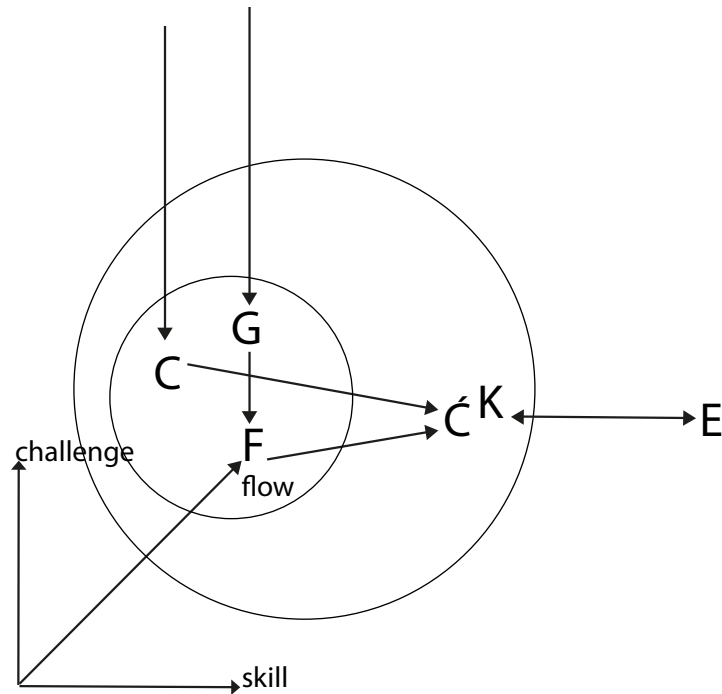
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<sup>80</sup> This hypothesis is based on my limited and conceptual rather contemplative knowledge of *kia*.



**Figure 26**

*Influence of Cultural Transmission on State of Consciousness Model. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc.*



*Note.* In this suggested Influence of cultural transmission on state of consciousness model, F (flow) derives from G (genotype) and Ć (ćef) and K (kia) replace P (phenotype).

Through my practice, I learned that dancing in kolo is not simply about experiencing joy and lightness, but rather it can bring experiences of tears, heartache, and more intense emotions. And so, when experiencing or embodying ćef, it is in this heightened place, this heightened experience, that we can transform ourselves, in a manner that helps us become fuller as humans. And as such, like Stara Planina shepherds, I too always strive to take good care of my family, human and non-human relations, and all my work, in a way to give me great pleasure and everyday full life—ćef.

**Inat**

Almost directly opposite of ćef, but equally as important is the notion of inat. While the word *inat* loosely translates as stubbornness, obstinacy, or spite, it is far more than that.



From the original Turkish meaning “persistence” this word developed in the 19th century into a meme for the unreasonable defiance and persistency which probably helped the Serbs to be the first Balkan nation to win their independence from the Turkish occupiers. (Lopičić, 2014, p. 129)

Despite the profound understanding of a well-known proverb “Inat je loš zanat”<sup>81</sup>, Serbs still see “the idea of ‘inat’ as a valuable part of their intrinsic character” (Lopičić, 2014, p. 129). For many, this perseverance, stubbornness (often to their detriment) represents their moving force or desire for life. This very particular characteristic of Serbian people, as many other notions in life, has its pros and cons.

Another well-known idiom “Ne idi glavom kroz zid” (Don’t go with your head through the wall) describes the negative connotation of this characteristic. However, even the most negative situation, such as losing one’s life, could sometimes be understood and even honoured. One tragical example of inat was recorded during the period when Russia and Turkey signed a peace treaty in 1812, after which Serbia was left at the mercy of the Turkish aggressors. In the small village near Belgrade, approximately fifty Serbian girls and women were trying to escape the Turkish soldiers who were conquering Serbia by burning houses, killing men, and raping women. Choosing death over dishonour, while holding hands, they all jumped into the Sava River. They all drowned, but kept their pride and dignity.

On the other hand, a softer version of inat kindles the competitiveness, which is recognized in many Balkan kolos, such as Šopsko Trojno Nadigravanje, where a group of three shepherds compete in a dance-off with another group of three shepherds. Trojno is considered one of the most beautiful kolos. With the high kicks, strong jumps, and almost impossible moves that require extreme physical readiness, dancers enchant spectators with masterful performances. While dancing Trojno, they share their energy with the world. With the universe.

## The Reason We Dance

Hughes-Freeland (1999) noted that “[d]ance analysis has tended to go behind physical appearances to seek out the meaning of embodied practices” (p. 111). Drawing from Royce (2002), she offered two basic options for analysing dance: as “patterned

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<sup>81</sup> In Serbian for “Inat is a bad craft” [my translation].





movement performed as an end in itself” (p. 8) or “how it shapes and is shaped by cultural standards and values” (p. 216) and I add “on contextual level and ignoring the form” (p. 216). Based on the three options, I ask the following questions:

Might dance and mainly traditional folk dance be seen as a manifestation of a holistic way of “being”?

Through the examination of dance, what are its existential underpinnings?

According to Grau (2011), “[d]ance is a somatic, kinetic and linguistic phenomenon; these three domains are inextricably intertwined and all are culturally and socially rooted” (p. 5). Felföldi (1999) described dance as a “complex phenomenon which has to be studied in its social-cultural-ecological context and in its historical perspective. It demands study in tandem with other synchronic elements such as music, text and other interactive media, such as costume and props” (pp. 57–58). Fraleigh (1999) further observed that “[d]ance is often spoken of as though it were a singular thing, but we know we have various ‘things’ in mind when we say it” and proposed “a family of meanings” (pp. 4–5):

Dance is not just any movement, but movement that has been created for some particular purpose (p. 6); Dance always has style. Style is “how” of dancing, its aesthetic character. Style emerges from intention; Meaning [of dance] depends on contextual whole. Context is the weaving or joining together all elements to produce a whole (p. 8); Dance is ubiquitous for entertainment and commonly used for socializing. As art, dance, can also be understand in its institutional aspects (p. 9); Dance is often used as a means to educate: “to draw forth,” to *educe* (or lead forth, as a river); Dance evolved from the therapeutic of ritual and in many traditions is still used to call forth healing spirits (p. 10); As a self-directed movement, dance is also a source of self-knowledge (p. 11); Dance often intersects with religion (p. 12); Dance is a broad category of human activity embracing tradition even as it evolves new forms (p. 13); Dance can be pleasurable and therapeutic. [E]xperiential essence [of the] the intrinsic dance is the root of all dance, whether the dance is performed for others or not (p. 14); Intrinsic dance is performed as body-for-self, not as body-for-other as in theatrical contexts, but looking for inward to the experience. (p. 15)

Sheets-Johnstone (1979, 2009, 2011, 2013) invited us to consider dance beyond the obvious. She is a dance scholar who asked “What do you see when you see dance?” Sheets-Johnstone (1979) observed that



[a]s a purely visual phenomenon, dance is an odd mixture of movement and objects in motion. The mixture is odd not because movement and objects in motion are strange or even unlikely bedfellows, but because they are bedfellows at all. Movement is commonly regarded as equivalent to objects in motion or, if not equivalent, at least reducible to them. Obviously, there neither is movement without an object in motion, nor is there an object in motion without movement. Yet upon reflection it is clear that the two are quite separate visual possibilities. (p. 33)

Contemplating about her argument I too query:

What *do* we see when we see dance?

Yes, we see movements and objects in motion, but what *does* it mean?

Sheets-Johnstone (1979) argued that an “object in motion” is an object that takes up space and exists in time and when it moves, we observe it at a different space and a different time—changing position or place. Originally lexicographers insisted that these “changes of position or place” were equivalent to “movements<sup>82</sup>.” However, movement is so much more than that and it should not be reduced to the properly executed change of position or place. Movement is separate from object in motion. It is a visual experience and phenomenologically it is “both cause and effect” (p. 37) of object in motion. To simplify it, similar to a time-space continuum, a fourth dimension used to visualize relativistic effects such as why different observers perceive where and when events occur differently, in movement “object in motion” cease to exist as a two-dimension quality and becomes object-in-motion. Sheets-Johnstone (1979) asserted that

[t]he difference between an object in motion and an object-in-motion, however, is foundationally a difference not only between two kinds objects, but between two orders of space-time. Unlike objects in motion, objects-in-motion do not change position or place. To change position or place is to move *in* space and *in* time. Objects-in-motion, by contrast, create their own space-time and in effect create a world peculiar to their own immediate presence (p. 41).

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<sup>82</sup> “Such a definition of movement may well have been influenced by philosophical writings about movement as well as by our unquestioned propensity to see way we do. But it is interesting to speculate, too, on the possibility dance itself might also have been an influence. For example, English dictionaries first made their appearance in the eighteenth century, a time when notable books, personalities, and ballets were also making their appearance on the dance scene. The first English edition of Feuillet's *Choreography or the Art of Writing Dancing* appeared in 1706; Rameau's book, *Le Maître à Danser*, which codified the five ballet positions and detailed court dances and particular balletic movements, appeared in 1706” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1979, p. 37).



Objects in motion might be doing something, while objects-in-motion are being done to: in familiar terms—the dancer and the dance ceased being two separate entities and become one. When a dancer engages in a dance, they surrender to the dance and its driving force—movement.

The dancer is not moving through a form; a form is moving through him. The dancer is doing movement; movement is doing him. To be an object-in-motion is to fulfill a kinetic destiny, and to fulfill a kinetic destiny is to bring a qualitative world to life (Sheets-Johnstone, 1979, p. 43).

Movement, as pure energy exists in its appearance and is passed through experience.

But how it originates?

Does the vestibular system emit signals  
which initiates movement?

Or perhaps functions of the proprioceptive system  
in an organism? If yes, which “organism”?

Sheets-Johnstone (2009) recognized movement as a fundamental element of  
life.

Everything living is animated. Flowers turn toward the sun; pill bugs curl into spheres; lambs rise on untried legs, finding their way into patterned coordinations. The phenomenon of movement testifies to animation as the foundational dimension of the living. Morphogenetical kinetic capacities testify as well to animation: cells divide in complex processes of mitosis and meiosis; seedlings mature; trees heal the cuttings humans make on them. In short, self-regulated movement and growth testify in a different but equally fundamental way to animation. (pp. 375–376)

Analysing human evolutionary heritage, Sheets-Johnstone (2011) used the example of a dominant male baboon’s behaviour (e.g., staring at those who annoy him, and standing erect trying to intimidate them) to demonstrate her argument that “[t]he animate is thus not arbitrarily animate; on the contrary, there is a built-in semantic specificity in the movement of living bodies.” [emphasis in original] (p. 303). Further yet, she mentioned Darwin who observed that “[t]error acts in the same manner on [nonhuman animals] as in us, causing the muscles to tremble, the heart to palpitate, the sphincters to be relaxed, and the hair to stand on end” ([1871] 1981: 39, as cited in Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 303). Confirming that, Sheets-Johnstone (2011) signified



that “[s]tates of mind” [such as moods, feelings, affective tone, and the like] are indeed rooted in “the anatomical organization of our body.” They are grounded in animate form, in our being the bodies we are” (p. 304).

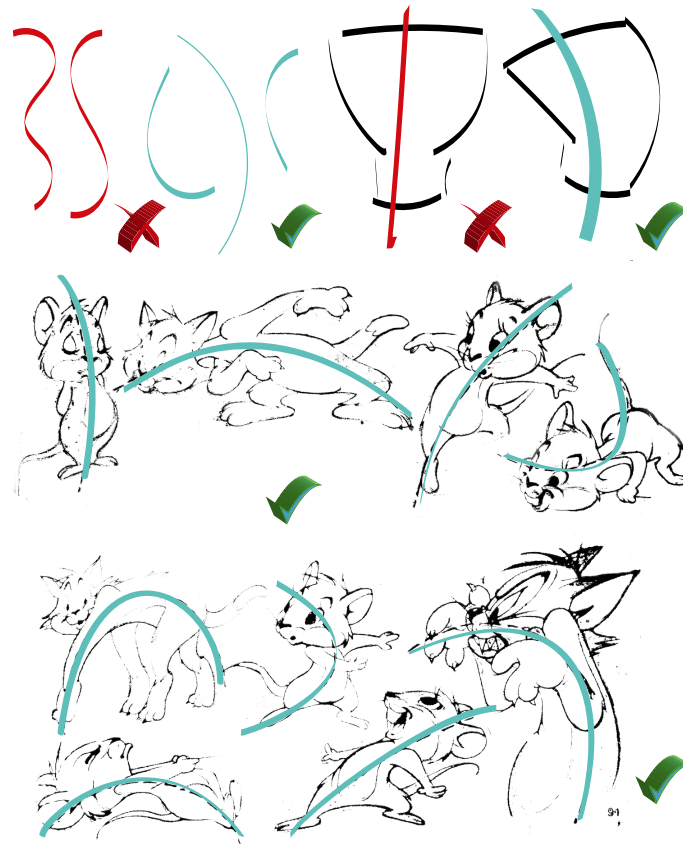
However, when adding “bodies” to the discourse, Sheets-Johnstone (2009, 2011) warned us to carefully consider what terms we use: “[t]wo terms in particular testify to the linguistic deception: ‘lived body’ and ‘embodiment’ (the latter in all its linguistic variations)” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 310) and “[w]hen we strip the lexical band-aid ‘embodiment’ off the more than 350 year-old wound inflicted by the Cartesian split of mind and body, we find animation, the foundational dimension of the living” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, 375). And this divide between knowing and being will persist “for as long as we fail to recognize that the key to both self-knowledge and organic life is movement” Ingold (2013, p. 308) added.

My previous training as an animator helps me connect with Sheets-Johnstone’s thoughts on a deeper level. Since the animation is an art form of portraying movement one (still) drawing at a time, one of the very first concepts to which the animation artists need to connect is the movement *within* the form. To understand that movement within is best explained with the use of “line of action.” Whether the artist draws from life or imagination, the first mark on paper they make is usually the line of action. Drawn as an imaginary line that runs down the “spine” of a form, the curvier the line—the more attitude, force, and movement the form will have (see Figure 27).



**Figure 27**

*My explanation of lines of action based on Blair, 1994, p. 91*



*Note.* While the goal is to avoid S-shaped (drawn in red), the line of action is always a curve (drawn in blue). The motionless line of action (drawn in red) is indefinite, uncertain, and easily overlooked, while the dynamic line of action is with attitude, force, and movement (drawn in blue).

Positioned to acknowledge the movement—surrounding and within, the one “we know immediately—in our bones” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 304), I appreciate Sheets-Johnstone’s (2011) advice that

with respect to embodiment, we must ask ourselves not only *what* it is that is embodied and challenge ourselves to describe it, but ask ourselves *how* it is embodied and challenge ourselves to describe in experiential terms just how the *what* we believe to be embodied — a mind, a soul, a spirit, a self, our organism, or whatever — is embodied by the body. [emphasis in original] (p. 312)



In dance, a body ceases being a thing and becomes a question<sup>83</sup>. There are many volumes and papers written on the topic of dance, yet this bodily movement is continuing to inspire new approaches and inquiries. From the sacred custom dances, such as Whirling Dervishes or American Shakers to contemporary performative practices of classical ballet or hip-hop, dancing is always present as an essential feature of human social life, and as such many dancers and scholars have endeavoured to understand it. To help me orient into this study I ask:

Fundamentally, and elementally, why do we dance and why *have* we danced?

What is the intrinsic motivation to dance?

To begin to tackle even a small part of this immense topic, I start with Anya Peterson Royce's opening words of her prominent book *The Anthropology of Dance* (2002): "Do we understand the reality of movement by decoding it, by translating it into another medium that allows us to make 'sense' of it, or do we understand it in a directly sensory fashion?" (p. XV). Continuing with this interesting inquiry, she observed that:

We are now at a point where we can do a better job both of looking at a body as artifact and understanding the cultural meanings of the danced, moved, embodied way of knowing... "Knowing" by doing is different from "knowing" by observing. Knowing in the body is inherently integrative and ought to facilitate knowing cultures from the inside-out. (p. XV)

To further illustrate her point, Royce also described the notable events that have contributed to the broader dance discourse, such as a panel at the American Anthropological Association meeting in Chicago 1991 titled *African-American Dance in Theory and Applied Research: Dunham and Primus*. One of the panelist, Yvonne Daniel "argues for the legitimacy, sometimes superiority, of dance as a window onto culture, referring to it as embodied knowledge" (p. XX). Daniel continued that this embodied knowledge "is inherently integrative and, if known through immersion (observing participation, in Daniel's terms), offer a way past the gap between native and other knowledge and experience" (p. XXI). She also argued that "in dancing, you are the connection between the physical action and the mental activity, registering an emotional

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<sup>83</sup> "Par la danse, le corps cesse d'être une chose pour devenir une question" (Garaudy, 1972, as cited in LaMothe, 2005, p. 241).



state” (p. XXI). In a similar way, studying Dalcroze eurhythmics, Dutton (2017) argued that his pedagogy is distinct among other methods to music education because the body is positioned centrally in the learning process: “The student discovers and re-discovers musical concepts through listening and moving responsively. The embodied experiences and perceptions are then assimilated with the student’s previous knowledge to generate a complex and multi-sensational paradigm” (p. 228).

In the book *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Foster (1986) explored four choreographers’ work in order to consider paradigmatic type in American concert dance and offered a peek into each of their unique forms. I selected the following experts to illustrate similarities in sensations among these choreographers and also different types and styles of dance, reasons, and such.

Deborah Hay’s cellular consciousness technique:

I dance by directing my consciousness to the movements of every cell in my body simultaneously so that I can feel all parts of me from the inside, from the very inside out moving. I dance by feeling the movement of space simultaneously all over my body so that it is like bringing my sensitivity or the very edges of my being from my head to my toe so that I can feel the movement of the air around me. (Hay, 1977, as cited in Foster, 1986, p. 11)

George Balanchine’s visual and other senses masterpiece of design, proportion, and form approach:

He can seldom be trapped into speaking of ballet as an art or himself as an artist. He prefers to view himself as an artisan, a professional maker of dances. When he talks of what he does, he often compares himself to a chef (he is, incidentally, a superb cook), whose job it is to prepare for an exacting clientele a variety of attractive dishes that will delight and surprise their palates, or to a carpenter, a good carpenter with pride in his craft—a cabinetmaker, say. (Taper, 1974, as cited in Foster, 1986, p. 16)

Martha Graham’s focus on the essential dynamics of the human condition. The movements she created manifested the exterior experience that originated in the interior of the body:

My technique is an attempt to prepare the body by formal and impersonal means to become a dancer’s instrument, strong, subtle, fully conscious,



free as only discipline can make it. (Graham, 1963, as cited in Foster, 1986, p. 30)

Merce Cunningham's investigation of the body's possible movement technique provided both dancers and observers the opportunity to be passionate:

Our emotions are constantly being propelled by some new face in the sky, some new rocket to the moon, some new sound in the ear, but they are the same emotions. You do not separate the human being from the actions he does or the actions which surround him, but you see what it is like to break these actions up in different ways, to allow passion, and it is passion, to appear for each person in his own way. (Cunningham, 1951, as cited in Foster, 1986, p. 30)

Each of the excerpts speak about dance as an emotional, somatic, and cerebral phenomenon experience for both dancers and observers or aforementioned choreographers who, in their positions, not only observe the dances, but rather they imagine them (along with the sensations expected) before the dances occur. It is interesting to note that Foster and the above cited choreographers refer to dance as a practice that attains to and evokes different senses, while Grau (2011) argues that "the commonly understood concept of five senses is an ethnocentric construct and it at such narrow framework is not very helpful in understanding the multisensory practice that dance is" (p. 6).

To be able to fully experience and/or understand dance in a direct sensory way, we need to reach beyond the five common senses. I apply Steiner's (1920) twelve senses (see Figure 28) as a viewfinder to go further into the matter of conceptualizing dance as experience. Steiner has distinguished twelve senses into three categories which relate to the perception of:

**one's body:** the senses of touch, of life, of movement, and of balance;

**the external world:** smell, taste, sight, and temperature;

**the immaterial, spiritual world:** hearing, speech, thought, and ego.





1. The first four senses directly apply to the dance experience. Dance, as any other physical activity, includes contact with either other human or non-human beings, objects, or at least clothing, weather, and such. Touch is a sense experienced through skin and if followed correctly, can greatly aid in the dance process by extending it via other senses such as movement, balance, and temperature.
2. Internal life processes and organs function through the life sense. This sense gives us information about our physical condition, health, vitality, illness, pain, injury, and such. Even if we are unaware of life as a separate sense, through dance this sense predominates as we become attuned with our body's limitations and possibilities. We notice changes in our bodies that happen during or soon after the dance ends.
3. While the senses of touch and life observe the body's boundaries (the skin limits the body's extension), the sense of movement enables us to perceive our body's movements and posture. Our body as a whole or in its parts—limbs, eyes, mouth, tongue, forehead, chest, is never still.
4. The last sense in this group, the sense of balance or dynamic equilibrium. Through our awareness of other senses, we maintain our balance by adjusting in movement, positions, muscle tension and such. Only our full recognition of the sense of balance can aid us in understanding dance in a sensory way, both as dancers and observers.
5. The second group of senses connect us to the external world. Observations of smell differ from other observations, because scents are often described by association, which directly connect us to our memories and as such, influence our judgements. In dance, it helps us assess and consider our surroundings.
6. The observation of taste is made up of two components, the actual taste of something and its smell both initiated from our mouth. Additionally, the tongue, the main muscular organ of taste, is also used for other senses, such as movement, balance, or speech.
7. The sight is generally considered the most important sense, however in dance, it is not positioned above other senses. On the contrary, in circle dances, where



- dancers hold hands, it ranks very low as dancers can (and often do to advance other senses) dance with their eyes closed.
8. The sense of temperature is observed in relation to our own temperature and to the body surface area exposed to coldness or heat. This sense closely relates to the life sense.
  9. The immaterial or spiritual senses refine the dance process. Listening or conscious hearing requires us to be quiet. In dance, dancers enhance the sense of hearing to consider their position and to anticipate their next movement based on the music, songs, words they hear. Dancers seldom speak, which give them the opportunity to actively listen and, in some cases, separate the music which leads them to their next movements from lyrics which give them a deeper understanding of the dances they perform. As such listening extends beyond an activity focused on others and becomes an internal activity.
  10. The senses of speech, thought, and ego “are referred to as the spiritual senses, because they are used in the observation of human characteristics: the spoken words, thoughts and individuality of others” (van Gelder, 2004, p. 49). To name a few examples—dancers sometimes sing, recite, yell out ritual orders, communicate with other dancers or observers, and more. Typically, the spoken words or sounds are carefully considered and almost always enhance or in some ways contribute to the dances.
  11. The sense of thought combines the data collected through the observations of other senses and forms the meaning that further informs the sense of ego. This sense as an activity relates to other learned activities such as playing an instrument or drawing and must be practiced intentionally especially during dancing. Each new step or lyric we learn translates into a fact directing it toward the existing explicit knowledge in some cases or tacit knowledge in others. As a result, new ideas/concepts/thoughts form continuing to build the explicit/tacit (body of) knowledge.
  12. The final sense of ego functions based on observations collected through other senses. Steiner (1920) explained that

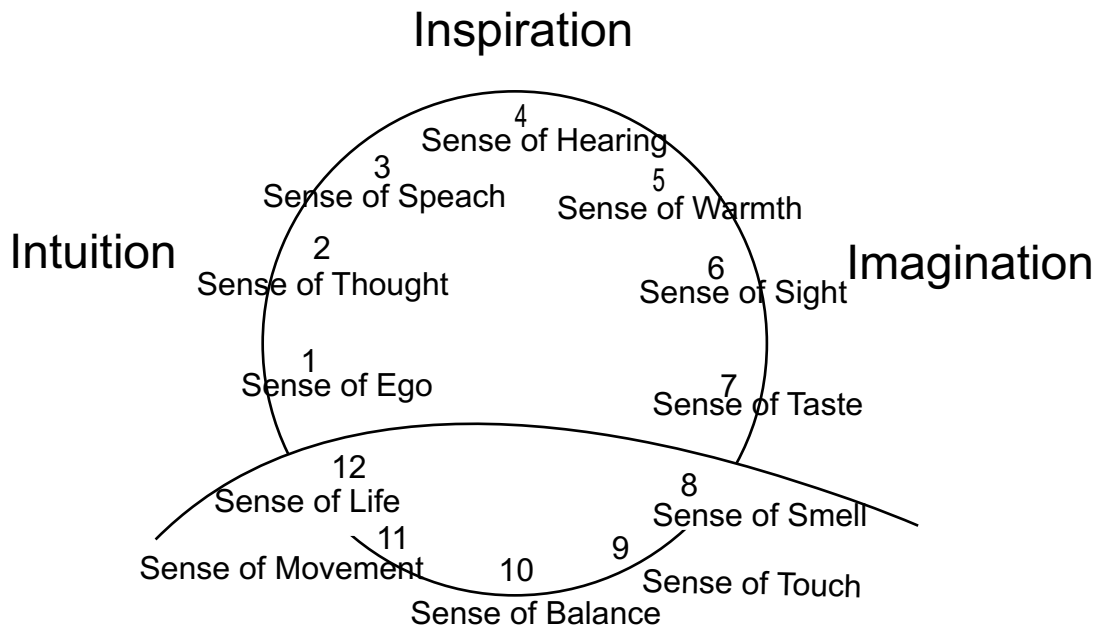


[w]hen we confront men we do not perceive only their thoughts, we also perceive the ego itself. For the ego is not perceived when merely the thoughts are perceived. On exactly the same grounds upon which we establish the separation of the sense of hearing from the sense of seeing, if we enter into the more subtle membering of the human organisation we have also to establish a special ego-sense, a sense with which to perceive the ego. When with our perception we penetrate the ego of another man, we go outside ourselves to the greatest extent (p. 14).

Similarly, in dance, the ego-sense not only helps us to conceptualize the world that surrounds us, it also assists us to position ourselves both relatively based on our current condition, and is absolutely based on our social, economic, cultural, racial, gender, genetic and such background. It also helps us accept our position as dynamic expected to change with every new information observed by other senses.

**Figure 28**

*My explanation of twelve senses based on Steiner, 1920, p. 12*



Steiner (1920) organized senses (see Figure 28) into higher/outer senses (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) and lower/physical/inner senses (8, 9, 10, 11, and 12). He argued that



the sense of sight stimulates imagination, sense of hearing inspiration, and sense of thought intuition. According to Steiner, when “man rises from the ordinary knowledge of the senses to higher knowledge; he can do this by going out of his physical body with his soul and spirit. Then, the higher kinds of cognition arise—Imagination, Inspiration, [and] Intuition” (p. 14). In dance, these immensely important higher kinds of cognition take us to the levels yet to discover, with which to connect, and from which to draw.

### ***Anthropologically Speaking***

The Concise Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology (Morris, 2012) lists dance as:

Any kind of patterned, rhythmical movement, usually to MUSIC and with consciously aesthetic intentions. Dance is sometimes associated with RITUAL (e.g., the North American ghost dance) or physiologically “altered states.” It may be viewed as an essentially social form of expression, either reinforcing cultural expectations of participants or audience (for instance to do with GENDER roles or MARRIAGE) or conversely subverting them (dance can be a “safe” outlet for politically unacceptable impulses). More recently, anthropologists have focused less on the functional aspects of dance and begun to treat it as a complex bodily event, to be notated, filmed, and investigated as a kinetic process that may be loaded with symbolism. (p. 60)

Seeking for a deeper meaning of a ritual and interested in ritualistic quality of dance, I am drawing from Bloch’s (1974) description of a ritual where he presented arguments to emphasize dance as the vital feature of the social life:

Ritual is an occasion where syntactic and other linguistic freedoms are reduced because ritual makes special uses of language: characteristically stylized speech and singing. Ritual is therefore a place where, because the ordinary forms of linguistic communication are changed, we cannot assume the semantic processes of more ordinary communication. The semantic processes of ritual, whether they relate to the way units of meaning (words, for example) are joined, or to the nature of these units, can only be understood after we have studied the significance of the mode of communication used in ritual, i.e., stylized speech singing. By extension we can also assume that the parallel modifications in non-linguistic communication which occur in ritual also affect the nature of semantics in these fields. An obvious parallel modification is the way the bodily communication of non-ritual life is so often replaced in rituals by dance. (p. 56)



Particularly interesting is Bloch's explanation on how dance in ritual settings is used to represent ordinary forms of non-linguistic communication or any other bodily movements which identifies a direction for this section's exploration of dance.

Hughes-Freeland & Crain (1998) investigated how ritualised actions varied in response to different cultures and their socio-political contexts. They see ritual as "an increasingly contested and expanding arena for resistance, negotiation and the affirmation of identity" (p. 1). Hughes-Freeland (2008) reported a fascinating example of the identity "negotiation" through ritual and dance. As part of the extensive anthropological research, Hughes-Freeland studied gender representations with reference to female performers—ledheks, in rural Java during the last decades of Suharto's New Order Indonesia (1966–1998). The ledheks are female singer-dancers who perform when commissioned. Their dancing skills come from a tradition of practice deeply embedded in culture and much older than any modern school of performance. Typically, they are hired to dance at events known as tayuban. "In some regions the dancing is a gift to the protective spirit in exchange for wellbeing, represents community identity, and also provides entertainment" (p. 140). After the food is served, men begin their dance with ledheks.

*Ledheks* in Java are paid to "dance [with] the *dhanyang*," the community spirit, but they have no experiential encounter with the spirit, and communication is through a male Medium. The *ledheks* do, however, convey the benevolent powers of the spirit to the community through the distribution of face powder, and their dancing returns the obligations incurred by vows of community members to the village spirit. Although they do not have an unusual supernatural power, they are [seen as] dangerous because they bring the threat of potential disorder. In keeping with the cultural patterns ... this disorder is blamed on female sexuality, not on male desire and lack of control. (p. 156)

Javanese female dancers, both court and ledheks are expected to dance with an aesthetic effect of sexual detachment and modesty. For example, court dancers lower their gaze to a point on the floor at a distance approximately twice their height and ledheks keep their faces impassive. Both styles constrain arm and hip movements and while dancing very delicately, display "sexuality without desire...which expresses masculine approval of female silence" (pp. 156–157).

Ledheks are also very aware of the risk of male aggression. According to them and the musicians, disorder emanates from male desire, and may be



checked by the drummer, who will signal to the musicians to stop should a partner attempt excessive familiarity...Outside the dance event, *ledheks* are also at risk of rape and robbery. (p. 157)

Further yet, “polite Indonesian femininity” (p. 143) when juxtaposed against male dancers is used to advance their masculinity and ascertain reputation.

Although *tayubans* display women, they are also events that represent a public and masculine social order. The *ledheks* become the means to articulate a male status competition. The women are centre stage, their bodies move, their mouths sing, but the voices which are heard are male. It is men who compete to dance with the women, in front of friends and family, including their wives, who are happy to see their husbands displaying their masculinity with *ledheks* – within acceptable limits. [emphasis in original] (p. 157)

While it seemingly appears that *ledheks* are hired for entertainment, the reason for their dance might not be immediately visible to outsiders and is potentially only known to the ones who perform it. To go further into this inquiry, I turn to Royce (2002) who wrote about Pearl Primus, a pioneer of dance research and practice, who “always maintained that she danced not to entertain but rather to help people better understand each other” (p. XVI). More is to be said about other reasons to dance.

Studying health, healing, and altered states of consciousness, Katz (1982) viewed healing as a “process of transition toward meaning, balance, wholeness, and consciousness, both within individuals and between individuals and their environments” (p. 3). He argued that while states of consciousness are everyday patterns of human experience, alternate states of consciousness are fundamentally different, such the state of transcendence. He believed that “a particularly powerful form of healing occurs when the process of transition is accomplished through an altered state, as in conversion experience” (p. 3). Interested in human potential, Katz learned that more than 1/3 of the adult Kung people, a former gathering and hunting society living in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa, enter an altered state of consciousness as a routine practice. They do it through the community dance, without any stimulating drugs and with that they release healing energy to the entire community. After spending an extended period of time with the Kung people, Katz observed that their approach to healing and consciousness is mainly rooted in their culture and the environment. “As a central event in Kung life, the healing dance both defines and expresses their culture and its adaptation to the environment” (p. 13).



Four times a month on the average, night signals the start of a healing dance. The women sit around the fire, sing and rhythmically clapping. The men, sometimes joined by women, dance around the singers. As the dance intensifies *num* or spiritual energy is activated in the healers, both men and women, but mostly among the dancing men. As *num* is activated in them, they begin to *kia* or experience enhancement of their consciousness. While experiencing *kia*, they heal all those at the dance. Before the sun rises fully the next morning, the dance usually ends. Those at the dance find it exciting, joyful, powerful. "Being at the dance make our hearts happy", the Kung say. [emphasis in original] (p. 34)

Not only that the dances are organized as the healing sessions, but rather, the dance is deeply embedded into the history of the Kung people and was fundamental part of their former hunting-gathering way of life. As a central feature of their culture, Katz observed dance as "Kung's primary expressions of 'religion,' 'medicine,' and 'cosmology.'...an orienting and integrating event of unique importance" (p. 36). Katz illustrated that:

Most often dances are held because people want to sing and dance together, as part of their continuing effort to prevent incipient sickness, which they believe resides in everyone, from becoming severe and manifest; as part of their desire to contact the gods and seek their protection; as part of their wish to have an evening of enjoyment and companionship. (p. 36)

What becomes increasingly apparent is that the dynamic nature of dance, not only in the sense of movement but also its mental, emotional, and spiritual influences, reveals the quality that creates "an alternative mode of awareness" (Royce, 2002, p. XXI) or alternative state of consciousness (Katz, 1982; Laughlin, 2020).

In the book *Indigenous Healing*, Ross (2014) described "in the Ojibway Teaching there are six ways to release grief apart from talking about it: crying, yelling, sweating, singing, dancing, and praying" (p. 244). Traditionally, Serbian people dance at almost every gathering, special event or not, but very rarely would singing or dancing be associated with sorrowful occasions. The exception is a Vlachs' Kolo for dead or Ora d'e Pomana (Vlachs of Serbia, 2018). The family organizes the event in honor of the deceased, and a slow dancing kolo is performed more as an act of commemoration rather than healing.



Is it the need to heal, to feel better, and to  
temporary remove oneself from the surroundings  
pushing one to dance?

Unfortunately, based on the customary Serbian etiquettes the opportunity to, even temporary, release the stress and sorrow, through the act of dancing is not an option while one is in mourning. According to the Serbian Orthodox Church expectations, during the time of mourning, one should abstain from dancing, or even attending joyful gatherings such as weddings or christenings—rules that elicit controversy among regular folk.

Should we regard the doctrines that direct us how  
to behave in the moments of the greatest sorrow  
and greatest need for healing?

Ogden and Minton's (2000) work in the field of somatic psychology has shown that the "traditional psychotherapy addressed the cognitive and emotional elements of trauma but lacks the technique that works directly with physiological elements, despite the fact that trauma affects the body and many symptoms of traumatized individuals are somatically based" (p. 149). Further, Anderson (2012, 2016), the founder and Executive Director of the *Kolo: Women's Cross Cultural Collaboration*, who has been working with war crime survivors and refugees for more than two decades shared her experience:

My own Serbian parents immigrated to the United States after World War II, and the intergenerational trauma that was transmitted from them to me inspired me to search for healing practices. As I listened to multitudes of survivors' first person stories, I learned about the South Slavic indigenous native social intelligence and community practices of the kolo, Serbian for round dances. (p. 284)

For many, kolo is rejuvenation. With every new tune and every new step, the rejuvenation process is working through the layers of consciousness until, such as in musical chairs when the music stops, and one is abruptly ejected from that space and returned into reality.

Benson (2001) explained that "[i]n aesthetic experiences of art, you cultivate the creation of feelings that you desire to be, at least for a short duration" (p. 176). Benson





also questioned if this “being moved” could be understood as “relocation.” Furthering this concept I draw from Dewey (1934) who maintained that:

[t]he uniquely distinguishing feature of aesthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is aesthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears. (p. 249)

Building upon Dewey’s idea, Benson (2001) further offered that:

[d]uring the sort of absorption that occurs in intellectual absorption when we are ‘lost’ in the activity of thinking there is not, I want to suggest, some merging of self or position with the intellectual content. What there is, instead, is a non-deployment of I. (p. 184)

In other words, I is removed, and with the absence of I, and the complexity of different kinds of self, one can experience the real restorative powers of art. In the essay “The Value of Music in Human Experience,” Blacking (1969) examined the extent of how much music can affect humans. Drawing from Mahler, Hindemith, and Balinese, he explained that music could create the

states in which people become keenly aware of the true nature of their being, the ‘other self’ within themselves and other human beings, and of their relationship with the world around them. Old age, death, grief, thirst, hunger, and the other afflictions of this world are seen as transitory events. There is a freedom from the restrictions of actual time and complete absorption in the “Timeless Now of the Divine Spirit” the loss of self in Being. (p. 38)

Would this undisclosed freedom be one of the reasons why people chose to dance?

How do we explain this primal force that is moving our bodies in the spiral of (e)motions often without our cognitive consent?

What is that longing, that need for dance that my then eleven-year-old daughter Ana described so vividly: “During the science class I was dancing under the desk with my legs only. When my legs got really tired, I continued to dance with my face.”



What is that sensation that we are hoping to experience whenever we join kolo in the middle of the dance, intertwining our arms with other dancers, and blending in just after a couple of steps?

“What is the source of this intrinsic motivation?” (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2018, p. 216). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) argued that the answer might be in the “flow,” the state of mind in the peak of the experience when the level of skill and the level of challenge are properly attuned. Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2018) explained that since the “flow is the prototypical experience of intrinsic motivation” (p. 216), and is usually enjoyable, the individuals are trying to recreate it. While I wholeheartedly agree that flow, as a state of complete absorption, is an ultimate goal in the pursuit of creativity and that it plays a vital role in the research of creativity, in the case of folkloric dance, there are other unidentified variables that are contributing to the whole phenomenon of intrinsic motivation.

Is dance a conduit for one to be transformed to a place and time so distant from one’s reality? Or, does dance serve another purpose? In the paper “Dance as a Way of Knowing,” Snowber (2012) invited us to consider dance as a way of knowing:

Kinesthetic knowing is central to being human, and the beginning of dance is found in the wide expression of gestural language. While one can lie with one’s lips, it is almost impossible to lie with the body. The body is a place of deep knowing. (p. 54)

She continued with an explanation that dance as a way of knowing delves into a “visceral language that has the capacity to connect the body, mind, heart, soul, and imaginative thinking” (p. 54). I have personally experienced it, and I have witnessed others experience its profound properties that no other medium can evoke. Body connects to the external and/or internal music, songs, rhymes, or individual’s rhythms and starts to release the deeply embedded knowledge in the form of movements. Sometimes these movements can be choreographed and rehearsed to the point of perfection while sometimes the dance is formed suddenly and without cognitive involvement.

Regardless of the methods and even outcomes these movements release clamorous voices that rarely need interpretations, just acceptance from the observers to receive and absorb the knowledge. For example, in the influential article “Symbols,



Song, Dance and Features of Articulation” Bloch (1974) observed communication from the point of view of ritual. He identified non-linguistic communication as “bodily movements are a kind of language and that symbolic signals are communicated through a variety of movements from one person to another...[and] that the combination of bodily signs and their order is used to convey more complex messages” (p. 72). My understanding of his main argument is, that similarly as with speech, the validation of particular body movements performed in controlled choice of sequences form the dance that conveys the message. He also argued that the communication in these circumstances has stopped being dialectic: “[i]n a song [and dance] no argument or reasoning can be communicated, no adaptation to the reality of the situation is possible. You cannot argue with the song” (p. 71). Whereas these arguments are starting to untangle the complex world of dance my inquiry remains open: How to begin to understand dance?

This concept of dance as a question sets the premise and direction to explore the idea of traditional knowledge and the means of acquiring it through cultural teachings such as folk dance. Since the main focus of this study is Serbian traditional folkloric dance (Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2017), I turn toward dance within culture and community.

### ***Kolo as Community***

In addition to observing it as a communication method, dance also presents an important unit in the process of building and strengthening community. Cajete (2016) advocated the view that community

is the “place” where one comes to know what it is to be related. It is the place of sharing life through everyday acts, through song, dance, story, and celebration. It is the place of teaching, learning, making art, and sharing thought, feelings, joy, and grief. It is the place for feeling and being “connected.” (p. 366)

Not only does kolo connect people in a dance community, such as dancers who dance regularly at their clubs, cultural rituals, ceremonies, celebrations. Kolo also builds a community for people who through dance as a traditional cultural practice become part of that community.



Kolos are among the liveliest, gayest, and most enjoyable dances in the world. They are very practical dances and should be adopted by all dance groups; most of them do not require partners, but reflect a very high community spirit. There are easy ones and there are hard ones. Then there is that ever present urge to reach higher degrees of executing the steps and learning new improvisations that makes one enjoy them so much and never seem to get enough of them! (Filcich, 1953, p. 3 as cited in Laušević, 2015, p. 186)

Regardless of their skill level, the energy dancers share in kolo is very specific. They often describe it as a way to connect to one another and to something beyond them—to which they all belong. In the book *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, Turner (2012) defined this “feeling of connectedness” (p. 18) as *communitas*. She believed that “[c]ommunitas is a group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences with one’s fellows” (p. 2). She explained that,

[t]he characteristics of *communitas* show it to be almost beyond strict definition, with almost endless variations. *Communitas* often appears unexpectedly. It has to do with the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning. (p. 1)

Kolo builds and holds community, which in turn builds and holds kolo. In this iterative and reciprocal process, the heightened spirit of community is formed—*communitas*. In addition to carving and holding space to be in the community, kolo carries *communitas* and with that both explicit and tacit knowledge, the idea that extends to the other cultures as well. For example, “Professor Ntumba, now of the University of Kinshasa, Congo, says that what he called “Us-ness,” his way of expressing ‘*communitas*,’ had been in place ‘always, already, and necessarily’— in existence before all time” (Turner, 2012, p. 9). Turner (2012) also suggested that *communitas* can be seen as indefinable and that can only be properly described through stories. She also observed that *communitas* can be revealed “through the flow of music and harmony, often the way the joy of the community is communicated” (p. 10), which again connect kolo to the phenomenon of *ćef*.

The experience of being part of the community is especially important for people in diaspora. For example, immigrants often face the cultural shock when they integrate into another culture fundamentally different from their own. When they experience behaviours different than what they were accustomed to, they start to lose elements of their identity that are not only nationhood but the profound set of values. Lopičić (2014)



explained that when people immigrate to Canada and often land in one of the metropolises, they expect to meet and potentially make acquaintances with its highly urbanized citizens. However, because of so-called “condominium mentality” (p. 129), they often do not. Lopičić clarified this phenomenon citing Wyatt (2012), who described that “[w]e’re all alone with our high-speed Internet and embarrassment of social networks, as concrete walls mute the existence of our real neighbours” (as cited in Lopičić, 2014, p. 130). As a result, new-comers attempt to retrieve to the familiar grounds in search for the like-minded communities, and often they join groups like Gradina where they can share their knowledge and learn from others.

Similarly to other cultural teachings (Figure 21a, b) such as food preparation, storytelling, or the making of artifacts, the rudimentary skill of dancing is transferred generationally while the recognized nuances are based mostly on the region or the period, and undoubtedly, the performers. Having the option to process the movements internally, dancers developed profound understanding and appreciation of dances from their region. Besides the opportunity to further their knowledge in the known region, at the same time, dancers learn about their limitations of knowledge from unfamiliar areas. The absence of initial comprehension demonstrates dancers’ geographical and most of the time, ethnic separation from the region of the particular dance. In other words, the challenge dancers experience while learning a new dance reveals both the new information about the dancer and the information of how to elucidate and embrace that new dance. We learn more from the process of dancing and particularly the experienced challenge than the dance itself. Since Serbia, as most of the other Balkan countries, has a rich culture and dense population, every village has at least nuanced, if not entirely, distinct dances. Similarly, the cultural backgrounds of Gradina dancers vary as well which in turn results in learning the rich collection of “authentic” folkloric dances. Through the regular practice of keeping the diverse repertoire, a vast majority of dancers struggle to learn new dances and with that a new way of being. However, although I use the term struggle, Gradina dancers even if low(er) on the skill scale, still dance in the arousal stage of the Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) optimal experience or flow model (see Figure 27) during practice periods, and even reach the flow stage or *ćef* during dance parties. As part of *communitas*, there is no shame of not knowing correct steps or not being rehearsed enough. During my first months as a Gradina dancer, when I was learning their repertoire even though I was an experienced dancer before I was still



worried that I was disrupting kolos' rhythm. One of the senior dancers eased my apprehension with her explanation: *“As long as you hop in the similar tempo as the rest of us—kolo doesn't mind. Nobody is looking at your feet, rather at your radiant face.”*

Presenting a simple answer to a question of why we dance might appear too explicit and restricted and not nuanced enough. Is it because without it we would not be able to progress toward becoming fully human? While I mainly describe one approach to it, this process of becoming fully human encompasses more than one stream and more than one perspective. LaMothe (2015) illustrated her position that “[w]hether a dancer is practicing hip-hop or fox-trot, contact improvisation or folk dancing, he is making the movements that make him able to do what he can do and become who he has the potential to be” (p. 5). Still, there is much more that can be explored and discovered about dance and the reasons we dance, particularly connected to the traditional cultural rituals and knowledge. While practicing traditional cultural activity such as singing, dancing, or being involved with rituals and doing it consciously, we experience the state of being a fuller human, achieving acceptance of self, through the process of balancing of the inner levels with the external ones, mastering our inner-selves to be able to thrive in the outer world. And of course, continuing to teach it. As Isadora Duncan insisted: *“Only that education is right which includes the dance”* (as cited in LaMothe, 2005, p. 266).

Listen, listen—the music has stopped. The musicians will start another kolo in a minute...Spremi se...<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> In Serbian for Get ready.



## Kolo Rejoices

### *Сунчева Женидба*

*Три су цвета у гори цветала,  
До два сјајна, трећи потавнио.  
Што цветаше до два сјајна цвета,  
Оно јесу два брата рођена;  
Што међ' њима трећи потавнио,  
Оно јесте сеја међ' браћама,  
Потавнила од млоги сватова —  
Проси Месеца за свог месецића,  
Проси Сунце за свог сунчевића,  
Проси Муња за се из облака.  
Мислила су два брата рођена  
За кога би сестрицу удали. —  
Ако ће је дати за Месеца,  
Он се мења за годину дана  
Пуно право до дванаест пута,  
Дванајст пута сестра удовица;  
Ако ће је удати за Сунце,  
И Сунце је нагло и жестоко,  
Припалиће сеји нашој лице —  
Даћемо је Муњи из облака,  
Кад загрми, далеко се чује,  
А кад пукне, свак се боји за се.  
(Sunčeva ženidba, n.d.)*

### The Sun's Wedding

Three flowers bloomed in the mountain,  
The two are shiny, the third darken.  
The two flowers that brightly bloomed,  
Are two blood brothers;  
The third one between them darkened,  
It is the precious sister among brothers,  
Darkened by many wedding offers —  
The Moon asks for its Moon-youth,  
The Sun asks for its Sun-youth,  
The clouds' Lightning asks for self.  
Blood brothers thought  
Who should marry their sister. —  
If we chose the Moon,  
He changes in a year  
Up to twelve times,  
Twelve times our sister will be a widow;  
If we chose the Sun,  
The Sun is hasty and fierce,  
It will burn our little sister's face —  
We'll chose the clouds' Lightning,  
When it thunders, it is heard far away,  
And when it rolls, everyone's afraid.



*Ако другог поштујеш за себе не брину.*

*If you respect others, don't worry about yourself. ~ Serbian proverb*

The story of Igranka continues.

### **Igranka, Part III: Joining Šestorka**

The band plays the first accords of Šestorka, my favourite kolo. It begins slow, inviting people to join. We all know what to expect, and we arrange our hands to best accommodate the starting kolo. I see some girls run toward the group of their friends to dance together. The first steps start gentle and everyone follows in anticipation of the next part. A young man leading kolo devilishly smiles, ready to quickly speed up as soon as the music allows. The music increasingly becomes faster—six steps to the right, four back, and two dancing in place, and repeat, and repeat. Three steps in, we sway right-left and sing-out “eee—haaa.” The shouts differ with every iteration of steps—improvised and impulsive, from the heart. Even though the tempo feels overwhelmingly fast, I am safely locked between two other dancers. Hand-to-hand, hands-on-waist, hands-on-shoulders we connect in kolo. We relate to one another in a circle. Our legs are working excessively hard, our arms are interwoven, and our upper bodies straight and perked up from the potent particles floating above us.

I watch the other dancers. Kolo bends and twirls, and different dancers appear before me for short moments. I watch them move their bodies in the same rhythm as I do—we all inhale and exhale at the same time, lift our hands, bend our knees. We all let kolo direct us, carry us to the next segment, and exist both within us and independent from us.

I see other dancers twist their hips and bend low to achieve challenging parts of the step. It feels extra painful in my left knee. A woman in front of me winced. Another one closed her eyes, some much older did not even attempt to bend, and younger dancers seem un-bothered. Kolo enveloped us and we are one: people-in-kolo, kolo-in-people, or just kolo. For a duration of kolo, we all experience the same. We react the same to the rhythm and music. I glance at the people standing on the side, and I feel they are excluded. There is an intimate energy within kolo that only the dancers in this





circle can see, feel, and share—the exclusive feeling that resets every time a new kolo begins.

The dance portion of the hall feels so packed that we can barely move. Regardless, the dancers have formed at least three different kolos. Youth dancers lead the fastest kolo. Their steps are pronounced, imposing, and loud. Their dance looks like they are shouting at each other, combatively and playfully. They connect by hand-on-shoulder and dance determinedly as they are inventing their own steps, kolo, tradition, reality. Every new iteration of six steps they dance slightly different, they improvise as they go, challenging each other's creativity. I see tumid expressions cross their parents' and community elders' faces when they watch them dance. I suspect my face swells with pride too. We see them as seedlings transitioning into a hardening phase, as our culture delegates, as future leaders. They dance in the centre, oblivious of the rest of us. We dance around them observing their every step, protecting the secret of our legacy, frantically clinging to the only thing left here for us, physically removed from our land and nations.

The music, steps, and rhythm feel so demanding and physically exhausting. Breathless, I question if we all equally enjoy this dance, or if we are drawn into it for other reasons. Why do we dance? I remember Celeste Snowber<sup>85</sup> explained that dance is our birthright. “We dance in any way we can and for as long we exist, even beyond that,” I think while my legs desperately attempt to keep up with the tempo.

I see young people, teenagers, some middle-age, some advanced in age. Many men, and more women join kolo. I observe the group of four senior women I know from the community. They volunteer at the long-standing charity organization The Circle of Serbian Sisters, responsible for preparing food for all Serbian community events such as this one. I saw them earlier working long shifts in the kitchen, cooking for thousands of visitors. Now I see them in kolo, keeping up with the music, with the steps, with the youth, despite their aging bodies and swollen legs.

Why do they dance? *Three steps to the right*

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<sup>85</sup> “Dance is our birthright. Movement is knitted into the fabric of our beings, and the very first dance begins in the womb” (p. 53). See Snowber, C. (2012). Dance as a way of knowing. *New directions for adult & continuing education*, 2012(134), 53-60. doi:10.1002/ace.20017.



Why do I dance? *Sway right-left and sing-out “eee—haaa”*

Is there an intrinsic secret that moves us? *Two steps to the right*

Or other people, sense of belonging? *Two steps to the left, stomping each time with the right foot*

Do we feel closer to our homeland once we join kolo? *Two steps in place, hopping on the left foot*

Where is our home?<sup>86</sup> *Each time*

I have heard people in those circles say: It feels just as at home.

What home do they refer to? *Two steps in place, left foot cross over right*

Do they refer to a home they left many decades ago and visited only sporadically mainly on the sorrowful occasions attending funerals? *And right foot cross over left*

Or a home they have been building ever since, where many of us raised our children and some their children’s children? *Repeat steps*

Are we trying hard to grasp onto something perhaps more valuable than modern houses or expensive cars? *Loudly EEEE—HAAA*

Serbian novelist Tokin explains that we do not need all that luxury to reach a destination “life<sup>87</sup>”.

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<sup>86</sup> “Home could refer to any place, even a temporary place that can be built or rebuilt, the homeland is a mythical place in the mind, carried by memory” (p. 207). See Steward, T. P. (2017). In between home and homeland: Diaspora identity as a cultural hybrid in Mohsen Namjoo’s “Cielito Lindo.” *Popular Communication*, 15(3), 207–220. doi: 10.1080/15405702.2017.1327049

<sup>87</sup> “Kažem da ne mora da se putuje avionom do života, do života ne mora da se stigne skupim kolima, a posebno ne mora da se uzme kredit.” [my translation]. See Tokin, I. (2017). *Molekuli*. Beograd, Serbia: Samizdat B92.



Are we trying to gather as much cultural capital<sup>88</sup> as possible to transfer to the next generations? *The music gets faster—repeat steps*

It is extremely hard to adopt new creation stories when we cannot remember our own<sup>89</sup>.

Could this be the reason we dance? *Eeeee—haaaa in unison*

Are we trying to remember who we are and where we came from?

I personally know one of the women—she came as a refugee from a war-torn Bosnia many years ago. She lost all of her possessions, came only “with a dress-shirt on her back” as she would say, and in her late fifties, started a new life. Luckily, she says, she only lost one brother in the war—she knows people who lost their children, and that was unbearable.

Does she forget her pain while dancing? *Repeat steps*

Is she, as I am, transmuted into one’s core self, finding self in a space where there is nothing except the music, steps, and kolo—no memories, pain, or hope?

The music abruptly stops. Completely exhausted, we all stop and clap, thankful for the music, kolo, our ability to dance, each other, and the joy we share—the joy we project to others around us who did not get a chance to dance this kolo. This was not an easy kolo, and I feel exceedingly proud for being part of the few who know the steps. I feel I belong, even though I do not personally know any of the people with whom I danced. I continue to clap, slowly turning around, hoping to start a conversation with any of the dancers, but they all scatter in different directions. Some of them straight to the bar in the corner, some back to their tables. Two women that danced beside me, hand in

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<sup>88</sup> See Edgerton, J. D., & Roberts, L. W. (2014). Cultural capital or habitus? Bourdieu and beyond in the explanation of enduring educational inequality. *Theory & Research in Education*, 12(2), 193-220. doi:10.1177/1477878514530231

<sup>89</sup> “As human beings become increasingly mobile and removed, both virtually and digitally, from the places of their origins, and as the myths they live by are increasingly silent about how to conduct themselves in the new landscapes they inhabit, human beings, particularly in the West, find themselves increasingly alienated from the art form of myth, and ignorant of creation stories, both their own and those of the places where they live.” (p. 42) See Hasebe-Ludt, E., Chambers, C., & Leggo, C. (2009). *Life writing and literary métissage as an ethos for our times*. New York, NY. Peter Lang Publishing Inc.



hand, dove into the crowd toward the bathrooms. I feel rejected and uncomfortable, and quickly turn to find Saša. I see him in the corner involved in a dynamic discussion with a man I do not know. Embarrassingly soaked in sweat, I rush outside before the next kolo begins. Despite everything, I am determined to continue dancing. After all, it is my birthright.

## Šestorka Kolo: Notation and Movement Pattern

Our third kolo is Šestorka, a very fast and exciting dance. Often, men and women dance separately, since men dance faster and rougher. They stomp vigorously while dancing, and it looks as if they are trying to shake and wake up the ground—the old mountain. This dance is from an Eastern region of Serbia, specifically Stara Planina<sup>90</sup>. The name Šestorka (Shés-tor-kah) means six beat or six steps. Its rhythm is 4/4. Before the music starts, women sing the following song accompanied by a shepherd's instruments—duduk (frula) and gajde<sup>91</sup>:

*Oj lele stara planino  
Po teb' sum često hodio  
Po teb' sum često hodio  
S' devojkam ovce čuvao.*<sup>92</sup>

Šestorka is kolo, but also so much more. It is an authentic depiction of a way of life, of the way people are in that region—firm and rigorous from the harshness of their mountains, playful and joyous from the spirits they carry in themselves. The kolovodja<sup>93</sup> leads kolo, setting up the rules and expectations (see Figure 29). Others respect, obey, and follow. Each of them bring the importance to kolo, to their community. They all know it, so when they dance and when they live, they all bring their full selves.

In kolo, the dancers face centre and move in a line of dance (LOD), bend slightly at the waist and look toward the right. Run R ft to R, cross L ft over R ft (1st step), run R ft to R, cross L ft over R ft (2nd step), run R ft to R, cross L ft over R ft (3rd step), sway to

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<sup>90</sup> In Serbian for Balkan Mountains range.

<sup>91</sup> In Serbian for bagpipes.

<sup>92</sup> In Serbian for “Oh, my old mountain, I walked on you often, I walked on you often, herding the sheep with the girl.” [my translation].

<sup>93</sup> In Serbian for a leader of kolo.



the R “EEE!”, sway to the L “HA!” (4th step). Heads up, straight backs, step R ft to R, cross L ft over R ft (5th step), step on R ft in place, hop on R ft (6th step).

The dancers face centre and move opposite of a LOD, heads up, straight backs. Step L ft to L, cross R ft over L ft with a stomp (1st step), step L ft to L, step R ft behind L ft (2nd step), step L ft to L, cross R ft over L ft with a stomp (3rd step), Step on L ft in place, hop on L ft (4th step). The dancers face centre and dance in place. Step R ft to R slightly, cross L ft over R ft, step on R ft in place behind, hop on R ft (5th step), step L ft to L slightly, cross R ft over L ft, step on L ft in place behind, hop on L ft (6th step).

The music plays increasingly faster. All steps repeat until the music stops.



**Figure 29**

*Kolo Šestorka, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 2020*



## Context for the Research

My story of Igranka with which I begin each section/kolo, marks the point of my reconnection to a consciousness of a worldview that acknowledges the different ways of being human. It also marks the point of reawakening in myself the recognition of the pedagogy of folkloric dance and its role in the holistic development within the community and cultural practices. Thus, my guiding research question: *How do cultural activities, specifically folkloric dance, advance holistic learning and influence the development of the whole person?* reshapes slightly to include an inquiry on how to acknowledge the pedagogies that address the wholeness of our humanness, explicit within cultural experience and specifically folkloric dance.

During the process of designing a framework for this study, I considered how to best approach and present my inquiry and articulate methodological and academic rigour while complementing and enveloping the topic, my personal and professional experiences, and the cultural background. I challenge myself with everything I need to unlearn and relearn—ideas flow in and out of my being.

Conducting research focused on holistic learning through folkloric dance is an opportunity that permits me to push myself beyond the comfort boundaries and inspire me to engage in what matters the most in my living practice, but also what matters to others<sup>94</sup>. While an expensive large-scale, multi-site research study provides policy makers with important data, I believe that all “[r]esearch matters, and I am not interested in privileging one form of research over another,” (Chambers, 2004, p. 7). Therefore, I have decided to search for approaches that will best inform different aspects of this study. Chambers (2004) opened her article “Research That Matters: Finding a Path with Heart,” with a quote that is central to the methodology I favour:

“I would like to ask you to remember only this one thing,” said Badger. “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive; that is why we put these stories in each other’s memory. This is how people care for themselves.” (Lopez, 1990, p. 48, as cited in Chambers, 2004, p. 1)

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<sup>94</sup> By bearing witness to specific experiences, sharing disappointments and successes of my past students and colleagues, collecting and sharing stories, I hope to disclose something utterly human and relate it to the nowadays humanity crisis.



Beginning with folkloric dance as my pedagogical practice and through other cultural activities, I form the goals of my research:

- To examine the pedagogy of ceremonies, rituals, and other cultural practices, specifically folkloric dance;
- To offer it as a manifestation of a holistic way of being;
- To propose participation in cultural activities as a practice-based framework in a process of identity formation and spiritual attentiveness;
- To add my findings to the growing body of scholarship.

I start by establishing the researcher's paradigm. I then propose the research design, collect the story, and lastly, engage in an analysis and synthesis process. Again, I use kolovrat to illustrate the goals and stages of my research (see Figure 30).

**Figure 30**

*The Goals and Stages of My Research Kolovrat*





## Researcher's Paradigm

The distinctiveness of this topic requires me to be responsible not only for the methodology of collecting stories, but also to devote particular attention to the analytical and interpretative processes, as well as care for the gathering and dissemination of knowledge. In this process I find myself in auspicious yet adverse position: I am grateful for the research opportunity while I am aware of the profound ethical implications involved with the traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. For that reason, and to be able to provide clarity and transparency, I begin with my researcher paradigm. I am inspired with Wilson's (2001) approach, who defined a research paradigm as a "set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions as to how you're going to go about doing research" (p. 175). I am specifically in resonance with Wilson, Opaskwayak Cree man from northern Manitoba who also lived and worked in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales, Australia. In the book *Research is Ceremony* (2008), Wilson posed two questions that profoundly relate to my position:

What are the shared aspects of the ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology of research conducted by Indigenous scholars in Australia and Canada?

How can these aspects of an Indigenous research paradigm be put into practice to support other Indigenous people in their own research? (p. 7)

In the process of introducing an Indigenous research paradigm, Wilson shared the complexity and interrelatedness of its elements: "Something that has become apparent to me is that for Indigenous people, research is a ceremony" (p. 69). Even though it seems simple and straightforward, this statement is loaded with tremendous depths of many facets of cultural understanding. As I nurture the relation of my own Serbian self with my academic endeavour (Wilson, 2008), I seek to situate myself in an Indigenous research paradigm as I recognize many of its aspects that relate to my Serbian disposition and position. Unfortunately, due to the centuries long mixing and assimilation with other cultures and traditions, such as with the Slavic tribes, Christianization, 500 years long Ottoman Empire occupation, and Western modernization, Serbian traditional cultural practices that we know nowadays do not fully extend back to the Ancient Serbian cultural practices. However, there are still some



traces of the original culture that remained in our ceremonies that are attributed to Ancient Serbian traditions, which is appropriate to weave in the research methodologies.

Wilson (2001) explained that a research paradigm is comprised of four aspects:

One is ontology or a belief in the nature of reality. Your way of being, what you believe is real in the world: that's your ontology. Second is epistemology, which is how you think about that reality. Next, when we talk about research methodology, we are talking about how you are going to use your ways of thinking (your epistemology) to gain more knowledge about your reality. Finally, a paradigm includes axiology, which is a set of morals or a set of ethics. (p. 175)

Further, Wilson (2008) stated that: "I have already explained how a research paradigm is made up of four entities: ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. But rather than thinking of them as four separate ideas or entities, try to think of them in a circle" [see Figure 31] (p. 70).

### Figure 31

*Reprinted from Wilson, (2008). Research is ceremony: Indigenous research Methods. Halifax & Winnipeg. Fernwood Publishing, p. 70. Included with permission*



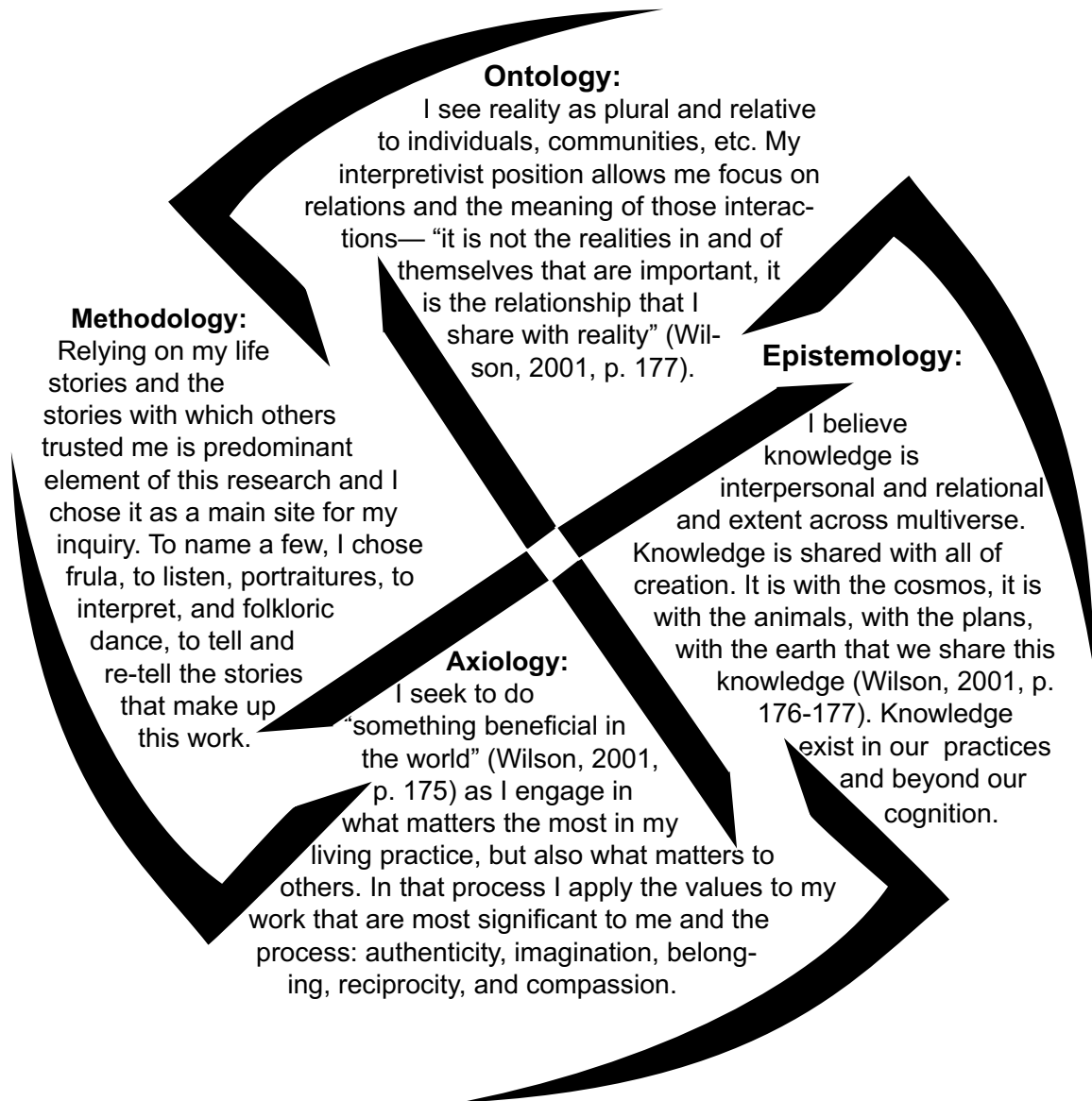
Inspired by Wilson's research as ceremony, I relate my research to kolo. For the purpose of the researcher's paradigm, I employ a four-point kolovrat to articulate my research paradigm (see Figure 32) to demonstrate the interrelation of four elements. As the kolovrat spins and we witness how those elements quickly come in and out of focus, it quickly becomes evident that they represent the same entity offered slightly different.



The spinning kolovrat allows us to acknowledge the constant transformation and fluidity of our reality, which results in the interconnectedness of the elements.

**Figure 32**

*Researcher's Paradigm Kolovrat*



## Establishing and Grounding in my Values

I am employing methodologies in the most respectful and honorable ways. Drawing from Hanson's (2016) principles that informed her methodological framework, I outline the *values* I apply to my work as noted in the kolovrat's quadrant Axiology.

**Respect:** Davidson's (Davidson & Davidson, 2016) description of respect in methodology deeply resonated with me, and I approach the stories with the same respect that my collocutors<sup>95</sup>—knowledge holders shared with me.

I ensured that I treated my father and his stories with respect throughout this project. This meant that I considered the way in which I approached him to ask his permission, the way in which I asked questions and listened during our conversations, and the ways in which I shared his stories in my writing and presentations (p. 6).

**Authenticity:** In the midst of writing my Methods section, fortuitously I found myself in a position to talk about my study topic, aim, and approach. When I spoke about my intention to weave in Serbian traditional myths and stories, my Serbian friend advised me to only write the most beautiful ones so [Western] people would see us for who we beautifully are. As much as I appreciate their apprehension of not being seen as beautiful, my study is intended to tell the truth as bare as one can subjectively present it.

**Imagination:** At the beginning of my study, I vouched that I will permit and encourage myself to see beyond of what is achievable and what it can easily be. As I begun this study longing for the unimaginable, I allowed myself the uncomfortable sensation of not understanding and extending my abilities to engage in the hermeneutics in ways I have not attempted before. I ask the same of my readers—to extend themselves the same courtesy as I have and allow the unimaginable. Eisner (2002) held the position that

[i]nviting students to use their imagination means inviting them to see things other than the way they are. And, of course, this is what scientists and artists do: they perceive what is, but imagine what might be, and then use their knowledge, their technical skills, and their sensibilities to pursue what they have imagined. (p. 199)

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<sup>95</sup> Collocutor is a person who takes part in a conversation. The term originates from the 16th century late Latin, from collocut- 'conversed', from the verb colloqui. I was drawn to this term for its phonetic relation to kolo.



**Belonging:** I came to this land and this study with a question and a longing to recognize the different ways of understanding the world around us, of being human. That desire is helping me create a vision that will exceed me, my thesis, and the time of now. This study is teasing out the complexity in my process of being and becoming. I attend to this work respectfully, engaging in the hermeneutics of my own culture and hermeneutics ecological to the new land (Kulnieks et al., 2016). I belong to the former and latter, as well as the liminal space between.

**Reciprocity:** I am profoundly resonant with many aspects of the Indigenous Worldview that speaks to my deep longing. I acknowledge that many of the teachings are helping me reach back to the traditions of my Ancestors and aid in navigating my inquiry. They profoundly inform what are becoming my understandings and knowledges of land, cultural traditions, and folkloric dance. In turn, I offer only what I can from what I have witnessed and learned from sitting within the circles of discourse, taking parts in conversations that acknowledge the powerful teachings of the Indigenous Worldview and All Our Ancestors.

**Compassion:** Recognizing that in the world, where dehumanization is a domesticated term, our responsibility to learn and teach grows with each Earth's rotation: how to be most fully human.

...you must keep in mind that a path is only a path; ...and there in no affront to oneself or to others, in dropping it, if that is what your heart tells you to do. But your decision to keep on the path or to leave it must be clear of fear or ambition. I warn you. Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question: does this path have a heart? All the paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are the paths going through the bush or into the bush... Does this path have heart? If it does, the path is good: if it doesn't, it of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart the other doesn't. One makes for the joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you. (Castaneda, 1968, p. 76)

**Responsibility:** Learning from Davidson who explained her process:

I recognized that I had a responsibility to my father to ensure that my writing reflected his intentions in telling me the stories. Because I reviewed my understandings with my father, he was able to have the final word on the communication of his ideas and my interpretations (Davidson & Davidson, 2016, p. 6)



I too, ensured that my collocutors had multiple opportunities and enough time to review the text and contemplate the portrayal of the stories they generously shared with me.

How do we

know

[our] path is correct?

How do we choose?

How do we

shamelessly deliver

the chaos

to the fresh, barely ready bodies which we nurtured charily?

How?

How do we

send

them to war

and

tolerate ourselves while crying hypocritical tears over our losses?

*How did we choose?*

*Why did we choose?*

Many years after I wrote the lines above, I listened to an interview with Dr. Kimmerer during the “Reconciling Ways of Knowing” series (2020) when she shared her worries about the condition in which we are leaving the Earth to the next generation. She told a story about her student who was just about to graduate. Dr. Kimmerer said to her: “I am so sorry that you are having to go into the world as it is in this moment, in these crises.” The student responded:

Oh Dr. Kimmerer, you know that this is the best possible time to be alive. Think about it this way, everything is hanging in a balance. It’s like a teeter totter on oppressiveness. When you live in a moment like that it matters



where you stand. When everything is in the balance, it matters what I do. I am born into a time when every decision that I make matters for the future of the world.

This person became a comfort to me—I think of her every time when my worry overwhelms me.

## Research Design and its Stages

I am a modern Serbian-Canadian woman who resonates with the values of my birth land's cultural traditions, and the values I encountered upon my arrival to this land that are deeply entrenched in Indigenous traditions. While my genetic heritage is only one aspect of my identity, it outlines my shape, and thus, dictates how I receive and hold knowledge. On the other hand, my cultural identity has brought me to this study which aims to discover, untangle, and release the knowledge I gain and have been carrying in me. While my research takes me back into the depths of my ancestry and I see myself as a knowledge holder, I do not represent all Serbs or Serbo-Canadians. As noted in the researcher's paradigm, I believe in plurality, and as Teta<sup>96</sup> Nada<sup>97</sup> would say: "This is how we dance in *my* village."

I am not able to specify a timeline that this research was carried out, as it seems to have begun with my first memories, and has been living in me for a long time. Instead of observing it as a longitudinal self-study, I recognized that the only possible way to absorb the richness of this complex subject was to approach it from many perspectives and angles. However, the essence of this deeply interconnected methodology is situated in practice, in kolo, and and what I have portrayed in the stories—métissage and braiding text, are the teachings of that journey and that methodology.

Storytelling is an alternative to narrative analysis and narrative representationalism in case study research. Whereas narrative is representation of experience in a retrospective chronology of events, storytelling can be more about reflexivity on one's situation in the lifeworld in a web of stories. Stories are more dialogic than narrative, not only in terms of being multivoiced (polyphonic) but also in being multiperspectival (polylogical) and in differing stylistic genres (not only text but also

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<sup>96</sup> In Serbian for auntie.

<sup>97</sup> See Kolo Listens and Holds Stories and Nada Putnik's portrait.



conversation, dramaturgy, and architecture) and chronotopes (space–time conceptions). (Boje & Rosile, 2010, p. 898)

While “inquiry into narrative” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 121) might appear to fit perfectly with many aspects of this study, storytelling is paradigmatically appropriate approach.

Story is one of the most basic ways that the human brain structures and relates human experience. Everything that humans do and experience revolves around some kind of story... Story is the way humans context information and experience to make it meaningful. Even in modern times, we are one and all “storied and storying beings.” At almost every moment of our lives, from birth to death and even in sleep, we are engaged with stories of every form and variation... Indigenous stories related the experience of life lived in time, place, and spirit. They were not only a description or narrative but an echo of a truth lived and remembered. They remain the most “human” of human forms of communication. (Cajete, 2017, p. 115)

By placing kolo in the centre of my research, I am able to travel in and out through the conduits of methodology (see Figure 6), sometimes numerous times, sometimes returning to the same ways, but always deeply engaged in practice. The centrifugal force of that reiterative practice has formed, as I previously described, three sequential but also often overlapping stages (see Figure 33).

Those are:

- Taking heed of the stories (research)

My profound commitment to and engagement with practice filled me with curiosity and marvel for listening *to* and *for* the stories—academic, personal, and traditional. “When listening *for* a story, the researcher plays a more active listener role in the actor’s storytelling.” [emphasis in original] (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 120)

- Hermeneutically attending to the stories (analysis and synthesis)

Hermeneutic and contemplative inquiries, arts-based methods, métissage, and portraiture carry the knowledge to the phase where I can connect to it on an advanced level of understanding. I explore and incline toward “the timbre, resonance, cadence, and tone of their voices, their message, and their meaning.” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 99)





- Telling and re-telling the stories (discussion and dissemination)

I share what I (l)earned on my journey and through the collected teachings I offer my readers pedagogical practices of attunement. “The interpretations of protagonist and portraitist contribute to the construction of the story, but the final contributor is the reader—who brings yet another interpretation into the discourse.” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 118)

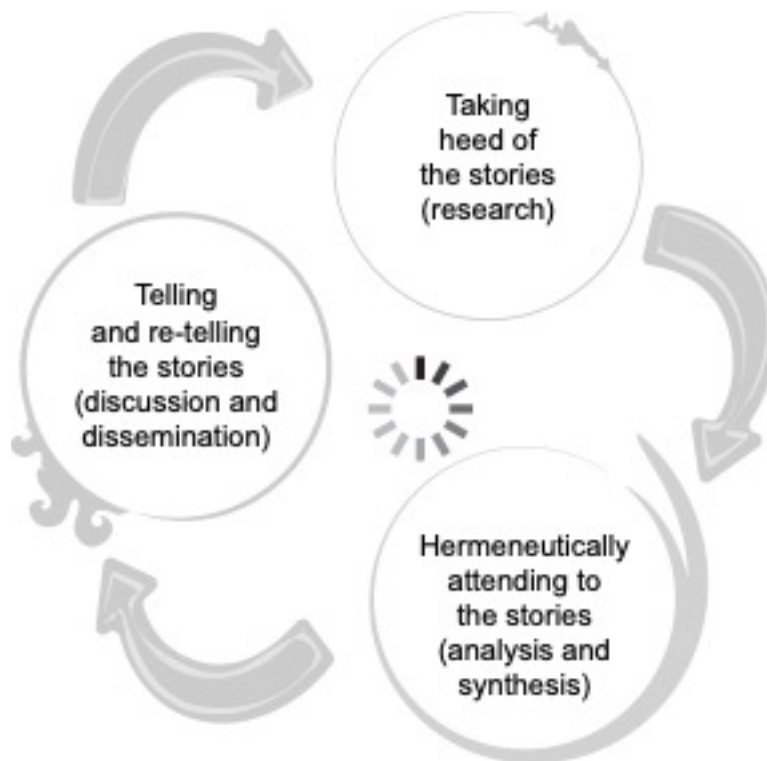
The work never ceases and will continue, always.

“There is no ending

We are eternal” (Wagamese, 2019, p. 63)

### Figure 33

*Stages of Methodology*



## Taking Heed of the Stories Continues (Research Stage)

As I continue to engage in this process, I am reminded that one of the first steps in collecting stories is to tune the instrument that guides us through the new landscapes and unknown fields. To estimate the space we attempt to cover, we should consider:

How far will our reverberations go?

How far back do we listen for the sounds?

How carefully do we have to prick up our ears  
to be able to hear every nuance of those tones?

Which tones are more important to us than others?

In order to recognize what we need, we must learn  
to echolocate. For that process, I have the frula.

### ***The Sounds of Frula***

A simple folk instrument of a cylindrical shape, similar to a longitudinal flute. The flute is considered to be one of the oldest and widespread instruments. In various adaptations, sizes, and shapes, it can be found in many cultures all over of the world. In the Balkan region, shepherds played the frula while guarding their flocks. The frula is still used today as a folk instrument for playing folk songs.

Kelly (2019) explains her native flute playing “as being in a discipline of wind.” She emphasized the importance of resonance in learning:

Traditionally an Indigenous Knowledge Holder is one who has learned to hold knowledge such that they become resonant to and with the created world, or more specifically to the environmental and spiritual ecology of their traditional territory or lands. (p. 19)

I too play the frula, so I can learn to be resonant, to profoundly understand “teachings offered, sounding through sonic resonance and reverberation” (Kelly, 2019, p. 17).



I benevolently push my breath, my source of life, through the auburn wooden frula made from an old plum tree from Central Serbia. I release my thoughts and allow my breath to lead the (re)search. I unexpectedly reach the note that I have not heard before, and I gently continue on the same path. Travelling the full circle, the breath comes back in a sonic form. I feel it on my skin at first, and allow it to enter me—the actual soundwaves to enter me. The sense of life<sup>98</sup> assesses how they enter through me and how they come over me. Vibrations push through, making space for reverberation. I fill my lungs with it, and push another breath out that I know will go further. The new sounds, stronger than the previous, like a hesitating teenager leaving home for the first time, start to slowly separate from me. I look to the mountain (Cajete, 1994) and let them go. I am with life.

Through my experience of becoming, I learn to hold knowledge that is resonant both with the teachings and the ecology of land from which I am, before and now. Cajete (2016) explained the teaching of resonance and its role to our understanding of being in the world:

Forms of traditional community education are always rooted in a worldview. In general, Indigenous worldviews of the Americas focused on the interrelation of humans to the multiverse. The highest value was placed in being in *resonance* with the dynamic balance of relations between humans, nature, the cosmos, other beings, and spirits of the past, present, and future. The epistemology or ways of coming to know that emerged from this view was based on an affective and active engagement of relationships to each other and the natural world. [emphasis in original] (p. 365)

Deeply immersed in the practice of kolo and particularly for the portraiture method, I conducted over two years of research in Canada, Serbia, and the US as part of this dissertation project. My exposure to the folkloric communities in these locations allowed me to meet, form relations, attend and document events such as igrankas, and conduct interviews with selected knowledge holders.

## Participants and Recruitment

Ethical approval was granted by the University to conduct this study. I hoped to have the opportunity to speak to the knowledge holders with diverse professional,

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<sup>98</sup> See Kolo Collects and Steiner's (1920) twelve senses section.



scholarly, or living experiences and engage them in a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. My goal was to include scholars within ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology fields, folkloric music and dance teachers and practitioners. I was looking for the triangulation of meaning<sup>99</sup> (Aluli Meyer, 2008) among and between these various knowledges, perspectives, and understandings of holistic education pedagogy and cultural practices.

The selection process began with my existing relationships. There has been a preparatory phase of approximately two years prior to the ethics approval where I have established relationships with individuals with professional, scholarly, or living experiences with Serbian folkloric dance, ethnomusicology, and ethnochoreology in North America and Europe. Once I received institutional ethics approval, I reached out to my existing relationships first. As well, I travelled to the academic conferences and festivals where I met individuals with professional, scholarly, or educational backgrounds related to my research. I have selected eight people (see Figure 34) and asked them to participate in my study.

All eight of them were of legal age and consented to participate. The selection criteria for my collocutors' participation in this study is illustrated in Figure 34 with concentric circles: a) their cultural perspective, b) their medium of choice, and c) the role they assume.

- a) The cultural perspective—the culture of their identity and any additional influence such as their research interest or marriage;

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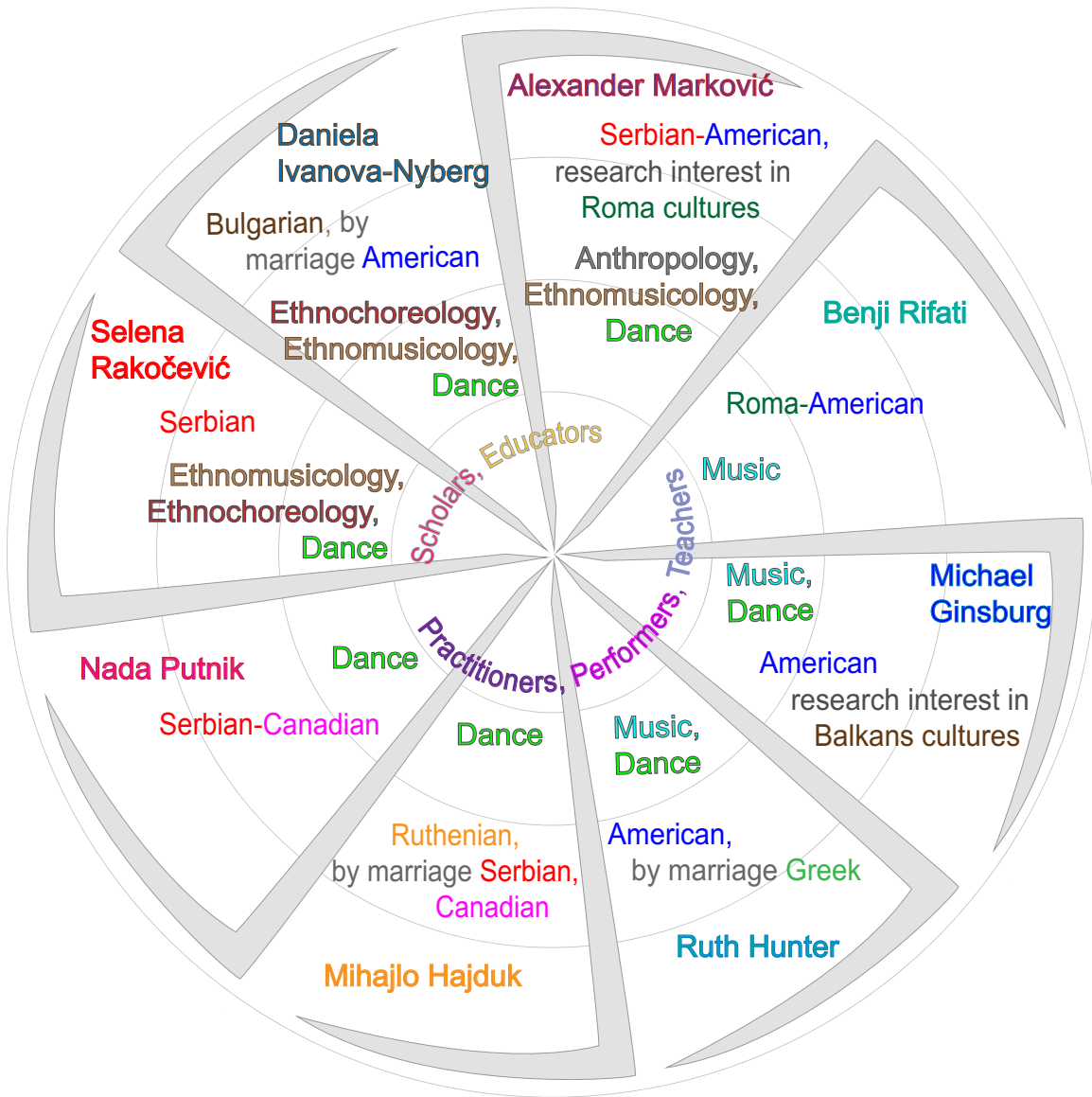
<sup>99</sup> “For Aluli Meyer, the triangulation of meaning (i.e., the integration of the body, the mind, and the spirit) recognizes (1) the significance of spirituality in knowing, (2) a deep relationship with space as it feeds us and shapes our consciousness, (3) a reliance on our uniquely experienced cultural nature of the senses to expand our idea of empiricism, (4) the primacy of human relationships because knowledge is a product of interaction and dialogue with others, (5) the purposefulness of knowing, namely, to heal, to bring together, to challenge, to surprise, to encourage, or to expand our awareness, (6) a critical self-reflection with a keen awareness of the consequences of language, and (7) the wholeness or the union of the body and the mind in engaging with deeper reality” (Aluli Meyer, 2008, p. 134).



- b) The folkloric medium—the instrument they chose to learn and practice such as dance, music, or academics;
- c) The function/responsibility—their involvement role such as teacher or practitioner.

**Figure 34**

*Collocutors' Criteria Kolovrat*



I have engaged in flexible one-on-one conversations with the collocutors. The details of these meetings are described in their portraits in the Kolo Listens and Holds Stories section, including excerpts which appear in a contrasting text style. Ethical relationality (Donald, 2012; Kelly, 2021a; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006) represents one of the most important aspects of this study and I have developed personal connections with each of the eight collocutors which further helped deepen our conversations. My insistence on relational approach was affirmed when Wilson (2008) stated that

[a]n Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, not just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all creation. It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. (pp. 176–177)

Not only was my goal to build relationships with my collocutors, but it was also to construct a relationship between the readers and the stories, myself, and my ideas (Wilson, 2008).

I chose portraiture methodology as the main instrument to engage with stories in an intimate way, because as a portraitist, I recognize “relationship as fundamental to self-understanding, to mutuality and validity, and to the development of knowledge. We see relationships as fertilizing the “common ground” that Jackson [1989] refers to, as seeding discovery and insight” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 136). In portraiture

we don't just want to take this expert distant perspective where we come in for three days and then we say this is what's wrong and these are the remedies. We really want to understand deeply, how the people in those environments are experiencing their world. How they are constructing their reality. How they are responding to the broader cultural forces around them. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2020, p. 136)

Further, it is my responsibility to ensure that the portraits I wrote for each of the knowledge holders accurately reflect their perspectives. To honour this responsibility, I have asked my collocutors to read their portraits and advise if I accurately represented the ideas and thoughts they shared with me. This is how I maintained the authenticity.



## Hermeneutically Attending to the Stories (Analysis and Synthesis Stage)

Selecting portraiture as a methodology allowed me to engage in my interpretive processes even during the initial conversations. I recognize writing those portraits as “an artistic process. Framed by the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, this portraiture shares many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography” (Hill-Brisbane, 2012, p. 645), which fits perfectly with the rest of the study. In the act of writing portraits, I was able to engage in the process of deep understanding and intimacy, which

Require that the researcher not only see the actor’s reality and respect the actor’s frameworks and perspectives, but also that she *herself* be self-reflective and self-analytic. That is, when the actor calls up haunting memories and vivid experiences, the portraitist must also be able to identify resonant experiences and similar feelings in herself. [emphasis in original] (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 148)

Writing portraits permitted me to engage in the process from many aspects, as I was seeking to “record and interpret the perspectives of the people” (Hill-Brisbane, 2012, p. 645) I was writing about and sharing their stories. This process allowed me to write narratives placing my collocutors as the subjects and not the objects of the research.

Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis (1997) specifically explained the process around constructing emergent themes using five modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast:

“First, we listen for **repetitive refrains** that are spoken (or appear) frequently and persistently forming a collective expression of commonly held views” [emphasis added] (p. 193). The themes that are easiest to notice are the ones who are repeated by many or all collocutors. Interestingly, one of the first themes to emerge was not verbally repeated, rather tacitly understood. During the conversation with collocutors, I noticed that many concepts we discussed are so deeply imbedded into the cultural practice that often we would assume one another’s knowledge and chose not to mentioning it verbally.



“Second, we listen for **resonant metaphors**, poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the ways actors illuminate and experience their realities” [emphasis added] (p. 193). Similar to the aforementioned tacit understanding, the process of identifying emergent themes in the “metaphors, symbols, and vernacular of the actors” (p. 198) began with the first conversation, thus in many aspects the interpretive processes began during the initial conversations and then continued through several further stages.

“Third, we listen for the themes expressed through **cultural and institutional rituals** that seem to be important to organizational continuity and coherence” [emphasis added] (p. 193). In addition to the regional cultural rituals that I expected to emerge, local organizational rituals of which I was not aware emerged in many of the conversations. Even though those rituals were somehow connected to the specific organizations, they affected the larger community and the quality of cultural practices as well.

“Fourth, we use **triangulation [of meaning]** to weave together the threads of teachings converging from a variety of sources” [emphasis added] (p. 193). Connecting with individuals from diverse cultures, communities, and organizations provided me with opportunity to layer findings with diverse perspectives coming to resonating conclusions.

“And finally, we construct themes and **reveal patterns** among perspectives that are often experienced as contrasting and dissonant by the actors” [emphasis added] (p. 193). While many of the collocutors had similar views on the themes we discussed, many of them revealed something specific to their personal or professional position. The strength of oneness and holistic organism is in diversity,





in recognizing and acknowledging different ways of being in a world, of being human.

I attend to this research as I am able, both from the nature/nurture perspective—respecting my genetic predispositions as well as the environmental influences. Both direct me toward my respectful, humble, *srdačan i srčan*<sup>100</sup> approach and my expectation of reciprocity. Wilson (2008) documented that in the “speech of Aboriginal Australians, other Indigenous people are usually referred to as “cousin,” “brother” or “auntie” (p. 73). This demonstrates an epistemology where the relationship with something (a person, object, or idea) is more important than the thing itself” (p. 73). Serbian relations are among the most complex (see Figure 35), and particularly in comparison with many of the West European cultures, in which only direct blood lines are recognized with specific names.

Serbians have a special name for each direct ancestor sixteen generations back, and for five generations of Descendants forward. Besides this, Serbians can easily determine the relation to most cousins of the second and third generation, simply by having particular names for uncles and aunts. Also, their children are not called “cousins,” rather, they are brothers and sisters on uncle’s or aunt’s sides.

While I did not directly include my family members in this study, their knowledge and wisdom are woven into it. Thanks to them, I am able to tell my story and pass on the knowledge I inquired from our Ancestors. Davidson (Davidson & Davidson, 2018) explained the immense value of strong family connections:

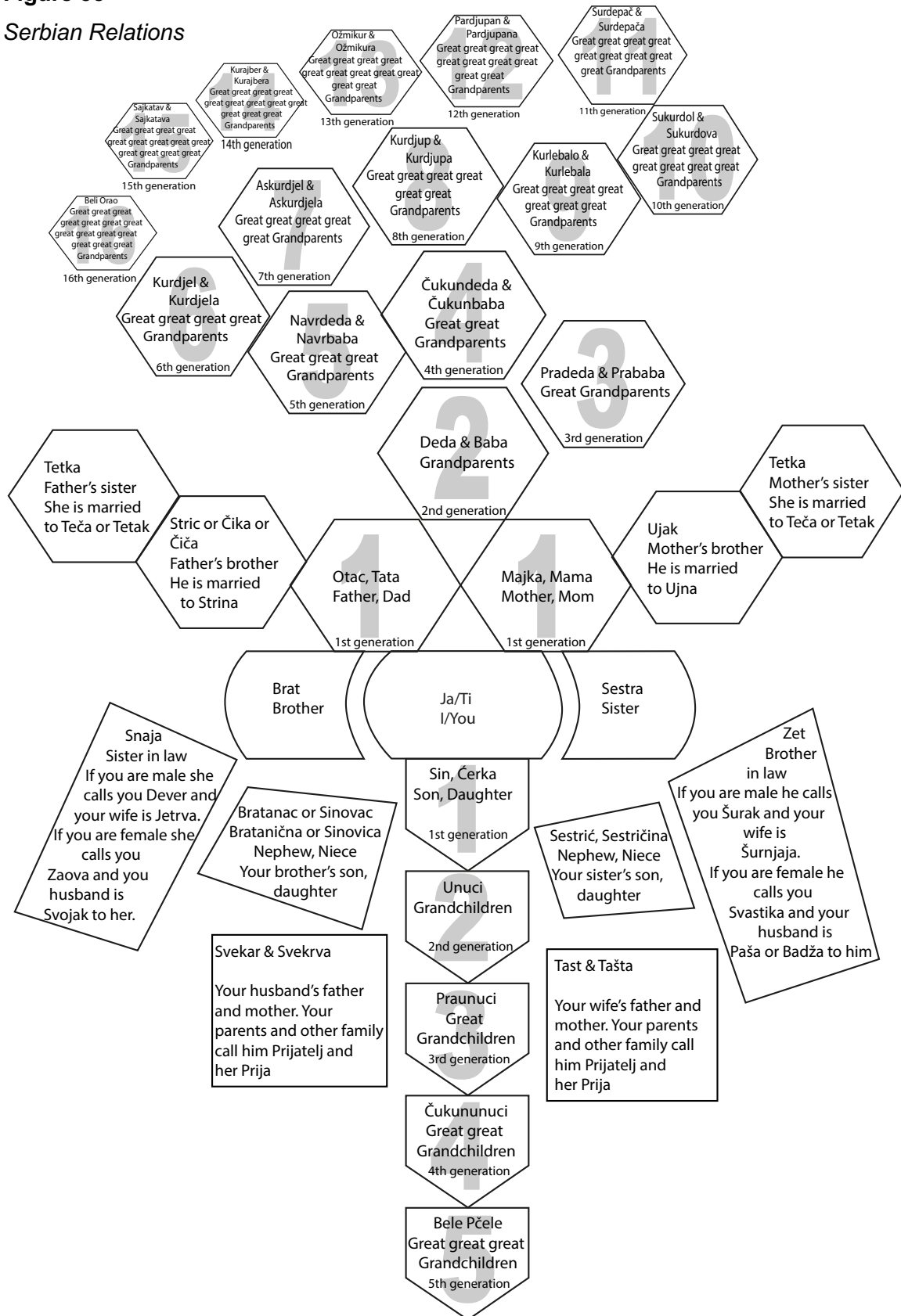
Without my father’s generation that was born in the “nick of time,” there would be no foundation for our present knowledge and understanding of Haida culture and ceremony. Without the younger generation, the knowledge could not continue to live. Together, we can propel the arrow into the sky and reach much farther than we could if we did not have one another. In this way, my father and I are two working together. (p. 9)

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<sup>100</sup> In Serbian for benevolent/hospitable and wholehearted/passionate.



**Figure 35**  
*Serbian Relations*



As previously mentioned, *Mitákuye Oyás'iny* (we are all related) is a Lakota phrase, which while looking at the convoluted Serbian relations chart, sounds more real. Raised in a culture where even in a multimillion population city, we address an unknown man on the street as Čika<sup>101</sup>, woman as Teta<sup>102</sup>, and children we do not know as seka<sup>103</sup> and bata<sup>104</sup>. I carry that epistemology and apply it to my new environments, learning, teaching, being in the world. In turn, a new generation is created with the expectation that neighbours might be more important than blood relatives, and that after all, we are all related. Applying nature/nurture values, I present eight portraits created with the utmost respect, compassion, and sparkling enthusiasm for the reader.

Ah *Šestorka kolo* has finished! Hurry, hurry, the music starts again—the next kolo begins...

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<sup>101</sup> In Serbian for an affectionate name for father's brother or uncle.

<sup>102</sup> In Serbian for an affectionate name for mother's or father's sister or auntie.

<sup>103</sup> In Serbian for a little sister.

<sup>104</sup> In Serbian for a little brother.



## Kolo Listens and Holds the Stories

*Радост Узненада*

*Колка је ноћца ноћашња,  
Сву ноћ ја заспат' не мого  
Слушајућ' коло и песме,  
У колу моја драгана,  
Све моје песме испева,  
У свакој мене припева.  
Дуго се, одо у коло,  
Али се коло распусти;  
Све драго с драгим заспало,  
А моја драга на само,  
Метнула камен под главу.  
Заде јој лале за главу,  
Метну јој прстен на руку,  
Љубну је једном и другом;  
У том се драга пробуди;  
Нак сама себе говори:  
"Ах! мили Боже и драги!  
Шко л' ово мене пробуди?  
Откуд ми лале за главом?  
Откуд ми прстен на руци?  
Да рекнем, да је од рода,  
Сирота рода не имам;  
Да рекнем, да је од драгог.  
Моје је драго далеко."  
(Stefanović Karadžić, 1891, p. 315)*

Joy Suddenly

It's the long night tonight,  
I couldn't sleep all night  
Listening to kolo and the songs,  
In kolo is my love,  
She sings all my songs,  
She sings to me in each one.  
I get up to go to kolo,  
But kolo scatters;  
Loving couples lay together,  
Only my love lay by herself,  
Puts a stone under her head.  
I put tulips on her head,  
I put a ring on her hand,  
I kiss her once and twice;  
My love awakens;  
And speaks to herself:  
"Ah! Dear and loving God!  
Who woke me up?  
How did the tulips come to my head?  
How did the ring come to my hand?  
If I say it's from a family,  
Poor me have no family;  
If I say it's from my darling,  
My darling is far away."



*У коло уђеш кад хоћеш, из кола кад пуште.*

*You get in kolo when you want, and from kolo when they let you.  
~ Serbian proverb*

The story of Igranka continues.

## **Igranka, Part IV: Čoček and Its Senses**

The dancers prepare for the final performance before the igranka begins. On the left side of the sidewalk the first ensemble dancers line up for the main act of today's concert. Dressed in Vranje, the southern Serbian city, crispy white blouses with red and gold vests, the young women look surreal, shockingly beautiful. In performance style make-up, hair braided and coiled in high buns and covered with silk gold scarfs, they shine in the sun. They look like flowers in their colourful shalwar pants standing on the bright green grass. The jingle noises they make with the gold-coin necklaces stifle the chatter. I can hardly wait for their performance and I know I will cry. They will dance Čoček—its music and steps beautifully portray the emotions, love, passion, suffering, a life narrative, verdict, and punishment. Once a lifestyle, today only a performance, it affects its spectators so deeply that becomes evident only much later.

I find my seat just as the music started. People in the audience clap so hard, excited with the music. We all know what is coming. We crave that lost feeling we hope to find tonight. The feeling we had before, some yesterday, some last week or last year, some thirty years ago. We all still hope to rejuvenate the feeling that had left a void when we lost it. An empty space we filled with cheap fragments, or sometimes more expensive, but still only fragments. And here we are—hoping that the Čoček dance will help. We hope it will fill us with what we need. With enough love and vigor to keep us alive for a while. I look around myself: the audience cheers while standing now, and the dance has not even started.

The dancers slowly walk onto the stage smiling. A young man carrying the goč that hangs on a thick leather strap around his neck, holds a thick wooden mallet in his right hand and a very thin twig in his left. He walks into the centre and turns while the others form a half circle around him. He stops facing us and nods, striking the goč loudly



with a heavy mallet. The audience gasps out of pleasure and my heart throbs with excitement.

The music stops abruptly and starts again, but now extremely slow, elusive, and erotic. The dancers mystically walk across the stage. Their steps are prolonged, their figures sensual. They move with tightly clenched hands. Their leg lifts are carefully measured, their backs are inverted in balancing acts. Their energy creates a portal into a time/space dimension where we all collectively yearn to exist. Not too many folkloric dances performed on stage can create such a potent experience for the audience. The one that you can taste sweetly in your mouth, the one that fills you so much that you do not need to eat for days.

Each new movement is a challenge for the dancers and a new experience for the spectators. The dance is extremely difficult. The harmony of the individual twisted, turned, and bent body parts responds to the beauty of movements. The anticipation of every new move or a gesture catches the attention of dancers and the audience equally. The dance always anew, unexpected, and unintentional, is untamed—surprising for all present. The music unnoticeably accelerates. The moves become faster, fiercer, fiery. The three-fold choreography, known as Vranje Svita progress through its segments—The women from Vranje, the female dance, Teškoto, the male dance, and Čoček, Roma dance all together.

The female dancers amorously curve their bodies and fervently tap their hips with the jingling tambourines. They move swiftly across the stage, taking turns in the centre. Their ruby-red, emerald-green, and old-gold jewel-like costumes create light trails almost difficult to follow. They smile fully aware of their temporary dominance over everyone present. Their dance stops being performance and becomes reality for a brief moment.

The music suddenly changes, solidifies the emotions, removes transcendent veil, and men stomp in the centre. Virtuosos, they acrobatically perform their power. The goč player kneels on one leg in the centre of the stage loudly beating the drum, announcing their presence. The rest of the men dance around him. They jump high in the air, dance in the short lines, connect hand-on-shoulder for full support of audacious movements. The dance transitioned from the gentle and sensual romance to the action-packed spectacle. As abruptly as they began, the men end their dance. They remain on stage



walking around inviting the women to join them. The women stroll toward them, taking pauses, teasing. They walk in a group and as they reach the men, suddenly scatter reveling the main dancer in the centre. She slowly moves commencing the last segment—Čoček. Through her movements heavy with emotions, she tells a story of her life devoted to songs, music, and dance.

Most of us in the audience know that she portrays Koštana, a heroine in a popular play written by Bora Stanković. He wrote about passionate love, young and old characters equally punished by life and misfortune. Seemingly cheerful, the main idea of the play is dominated by melancholy in combination with song and music. They sing *“It is not treasure silver and gold, but it is a treasure that pleases the heart.”* Alas, the songs, especially performed by Koštana, rarely express joy and pleasure, rather depict confession and sadness over lost dreams and hopes. The other characters in the play also sing passionately and voice their regret for youth, unrealized love, pain for marrying a person they did not love, longing for a loved one. But Koštana does not want to settle down and marry—she only wants to sing and dance. However, she unintentionally seduces rich and powerful men of Vranje. To prohibit and stop that hedonistic attitude towards life, the city council banishes her to Turkey, but the men, eager for her songs and music, bring her back. When the Mayor of Vranje realizes there is no other way, he threatens to forcibly marry her to a person she does not love. But she is not afraid—despite everything she continues to sing. The night before her forced wedding a wealthy and handsome young man offers to marry her instead, but she knows she does not belong in his wealthy house. She begs another man to take her somewhere so she can sing and dance, but he regretfully responds—*“Clench your heart and suffer. Be a human; A human is made only for grief and anguish!”* With that, Koštana lifts her head up and proudly heads for her wedding facing her new miserable life.

On the stage, the intensity of the music accelerates. The women dance wildly around the main dancer tapping their tambourines sensually, awakening feelings and disturbing senses. The centre dancer temperamentally dances faster and faster. The man with the goč kneels in front of her. She jumps on the drum and continues dancing on top of it. The rest of the dancers kneel in the circle around them. She swiftly bangs another round with the tambourine on her shoulder and the hips and with that culminates the show.



The audience jumps on their feet, clapping and whooping. I am breathless, fighting back my tears. They filled us, filled me with emotions I desired. I treasure those feelings, hoping they will linger in me for a long time.

## Čoček Kolo Notation and Movement Pattern

Our fourth kolo, Čoček is a dance and a musical genre. It originated from Ottoman Turkey and spread to Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Romania. As other dances, it is handed down through the generations, preserved mostly by the Roma nation. There are many varieties and ethnic sub-styles of Čoček. Here, I share the notation for Indijski (East Indian) Čoček. Its meter is 2/4 and ten bars before the music repeats:

Bar 1: Dancers face LOD, tap R ft and step on R ft.

Bar 2: Tap L ft and step on L ft.

Bar 3: Face centre tap R ft to R and step on R ft behind L ft.

Bar 4: Step L ft to L and step R ft next to L ft.

Bar 5: Sway into the centre on L ft and sway in place on R ft.

Bar 6: Sway back on L ft and sway in place on R ft.

Bar 7: Sway into the centre on L ft and sway in place on R ft.

Bar 8: Tap L ft forward and sway on L ft next to the R ft.

Bar 9: Sway forward into centre with R ft and sway in place on L ft.

Bar 10: Step R ft next to L ft and cross L ft over R ft.

All steps repeat until the music stops.

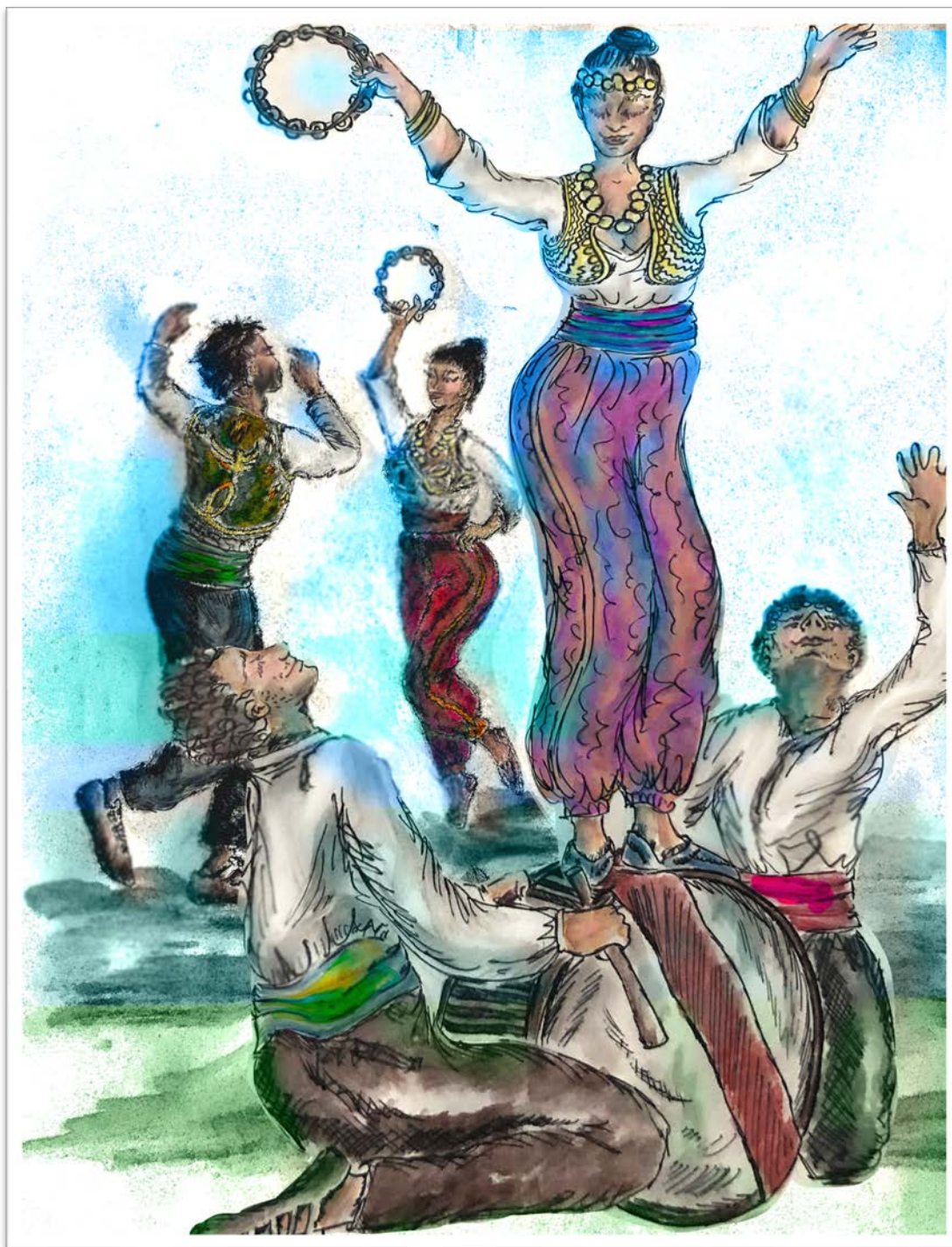
I also share my vision of the Čoček dance (see Figure 36). With an ease impossible for other dancers, the main dancer, Čočekinja, jumps on the goč to extend the time of her temporary dominance for just a few more minutes. She shakes her tambourine, showcasing her stunning dancing skills, to teach us one more time that life should not be lived without music, dance, ćef...





**Figure 36**

*Kolo Čoček, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 2020*



## Portraits

Every portrait that is painted with a feeling is a portrait of the artist not a sitter. The sitter is merely an accident, an occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter, who on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my soul. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (as cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 85)

In this section I present the portraits of scholars, educators, musicians, and dancers that have enriched my understanding of how the cultural practices, specifically folkloric dance, advance holistic learning and thus matter to the development of a whole person. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) wrote about “a view of a whole.” She shared that she has been both “challenged by, and devoted to, the search for authenticity and authority, for resonance and truth. ‘Portraiture’ has become the bridge that has brought these two worlds together...allowing for both contrast and coexistence, counterpoint and harmony” (p. 3). My goal is to present the portraits as vital and vivid as I have experienced them. I want my readers to see my collocutors as established, treasured, and respected as I saw them, allowing them to inform and inspire us. This practice of interviewing and writing presented me with the generosity, compassion, and encouragement I did not dare to imagine, much less to expect, which further led me toward new understandings and visions I hope to turn into active transformations.

I observed my collocutors in their context (see Figure 34) and recorded their experience employing five fundamental approaches: the physical settings they occupied, my position as a researcher, history, culture and the ideology of the context, metaphors and symbols that shaped the narratives, and how my collocutors formed the stories that I am about to tell.

In the order of our conversations, I present you my collocutors:



**Nada Putnik,  
Gradina Dance Club, Vancouver, Canada**

As I write about Nada, I realize that I have never booked a formal interview with her, rather my knowledge comes from the impromptu, spontaneous conversations that took place before and after our rehearsals, while dancing, during lunches, dinners, excursions, and trips. Thinking about these occasions and Nada's stories warms my heart.

I am not alone in my admiration of Nada. During our practices, as soon as she starts talking about her experiences, about old traditions, about how she was painting her fence, or climbing her plum tree so she can make the best knedle sa šljivama<sup>105</sup>, anything that has happened to her or that she had heard and wants to share with us, we all "prick our ears" absorbing every word she says. She speaks in a matter-of-factly, comical, and cheerful tone that radiates hope. Hence her name—Nada<sup>106</sup>. And all that in a spectrum of emotions. Nada represents an ideal of the Serbian Mother—warm and loving, strict, respected, humorous, excellent cook, skillful, knowledgeable, active, clever, and all that *without* making us guilty or ashamed. She does not criticize when we miss practice, when we dance with the wrong foot, or when we talk and do not pay attention. She calls us out in her raised voice and stern tone that demands respect but not fear. Or anguish. Rather, profound love and nostalgia for the dominating matriarch to which we release all of our worries. Nada speaks to us not only with hope, rather with high expectations. So, we can hand-in-hand relate to one another. Become together. Full humans.

***Beginnings***

Nada tells her story about the time when she was a high-school student and she wished to join a folkloric dance club. However, because she attended a higher-middle-class school, there was no club she could have joined. In the early 1950s in the smaller urban areas, only proletariat organized folklore clubs were often without access to the wider social classes. It was only when Nada enrolled in university and moved to Belgrade, she was able to start dancing. But even that soon appeared problematic:

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<sup>105</sup> In Serbian for traditional plum dumplings.

<sup>106</sup> In Serbian for hope.



Between studying, working, and travelling to her hometown every Friday to be with her parents, she could not dedicate enough time to the folkloric dance. Time passed and times changed. Nada finished university, met Radovan, moved back to their hometown Zrenjanin, married, had two girls, and a full-time job. However, shortly after Yugoslavia became too small for them, the young family raised the anchor and immigrated to Canada.

### ***Finding the Body (Community) to Which They Belong***

It was the winter of 1975 when the Putniks arrived in the new country and almost immediately started suffering from a severe case of incurable homesickness. Even before they arrived, Nada's sister Lala was occasionally and non-committedly folk dancing "here and there," but nothing that could have mitigated dreadful nostalgic moods from which Nada and Radovan suffered. Until one day there was an ad in a local paper about the folkloric dance evening at the Confederation Park in Burnaby. Nada speaks with the smile:

I remember it so clearly. As we arrived and were walking across the park you could hear our music. And we are in Canada! We were here maybe for half a year, surrounded by English only that whole time. And then you hear our music... Can you imagine what that meant for us?! So, the three of us, Radovan, Lala and I, humbly stood on the side. We didn't know what to expect.

Nada speaks excitedly, occasionally stuttering, trying to say many words at once. The energy and the excitement of that evening is bursting out of her. Before my eyes, she transforms into a young girl and I suddenly see her as my daughter Ana who spins with her arms stretched out wide to intensify the feeling of happiness. Nada talks with such passion—in this moment she is captivated by her memories and I am captivated by her and her story. She continues:

We knew the melodies, songs. We could hum, we could even sing, but we didn't know the steps to kolos. The music for Zaplanjski Čačak started to play and Jim, who is 100%—head-to-toe Canadian, goes in the circle to start teaching. Our jaws dropped. But we go into kolo. Jim, who is also an engineer, I later learned, explained the steps mathematically: six then three, four then two, two then one. And we got it. He played the music again and we danced. We got it! Imagine the feeling, the first time that someone, some Canadian is explaining steps to kolo, and in a way that you get it right away. And now you know your kolo. Unbelievably fantastic feeling! You don't have to be at home to feel at home. And Canadians are teaching it. Utter respect!



That evening marked the beginning of Nada's involvement with folkloric dance. The rest is "history" as she would say. Things just all fell into place. Soon after, Nada started dancing at the Vancouver International Folk Dancers (VIFD) club or as she would say: "I could not wait for September to start dancing."

When I came first to the VIFD practices, there were over two hundred members and we all wore name tags. I noticed a man with the name Eric that was dancing phenomenally. I knew that many of the dances were not of Serbian ancestry or even Balkans, Slavic, but I thought to myself this one must be and even his name was. It turned out the man was English. I could not believe it!

[Erić is a very typical Serbian last name and Nada read the first-name Eric as a last-name Erić]

Nada recalls that the club's practices were on Mondays for beginners, on Thursdays for advanced dancers, and on Sundays for children. She laughs when she remembers how she would bring her black notebook in which she would note kolos' names and steps, histories, and such. "That was all pre-google," she laughs.

The teachers would always make the dance program for the evening, as I do it for us at Gradina practices, and they would also allow time for our requests. So, when the program ends and the teachers ask us for requests, I would pull my black notebook and list all my favourite kolos. So that is how I was learning triple the speed!

While Nada and Radovan attended practices for adults, they also brought their girls Jelena and Selena to the classes for children. I ask her why they chose the VIFD and not the children ensemble at the Serbian Church. She shrugs.

No real reason other than we wanted to stay close. To learn from the same people, to be a part of the same community. It was important for us to know our children can see us engaged in an activity we love, with people we respect, with community we support. With that, we were crocheting the Serbian social milieu.

Nada talks about how non-Balkan people are enthusiastic about Balkan music and songs, generally about the culture to which they might not even belong. I ask her to explain that phenomenon. Nada thinks for a while and explains her theory that people generally get involved in four cumulative stages. She claims that at first, people get attracted to the music and rhythm. "*It's like love at first sight,*" Nada clarifies. According to her, once they start dancing and they understand the peculiarity of the



music and dances then they are hooked. After the initial exposure, people start going to festivals, seminars, and workshops. The more they learn about Serbian, or Balkans' cultures, their interest increases. The third stage is a wardrobe—nošnje, traditional costumes, regalia. They start to embroider their own or to look for opportunities to buy. Nada nods slowly adding the assurance to her words:

Once they start wearing our nošnje then it is a different story. Spiritually they start to parallel, to balance with our ways. More and more, from the way we carry ourselves they pick up our values and believes. For example, we stand tall and look directly at each other when we dance—honesty, truthfulness, being a good person, able to stand tall knowing you did everything as you best could or knew how, is one of our number one value.

And the last stage is the language. Nada explains:

Only through specific words people can profoundly connect with our culture. They knew that so that is why they were looking for language lessons. My Radovan was teaching Serbian language at the club. But you know what is the most interestingly to note? Most of the people from the club were university professors, lawyers, doctors, engineers, all in all professionals,

she proudly claims.

### ***Intergenerational Learning in an Unexpected Community***

Not too long after the Putniks joined VIFD they were invited to join the Serbian church community. Nada recalls the time when the City of Vancouver organized a two-week long folk festival where all ethnic groups had their own open houses on display for a full week. Nada loved the idea of demonstrating Serbian culture so she gathered her “most faithful companions,” of her which consisted her husband Radovan, sister Lala, and friend Marica and along with Pop and Popadija<sup>107</sup> presented Vancouverites with the Serbian heritage. Slowly, Nada's involvement with church activities increased, and she would often involve her friends from the VIFD. She tells a story of a time when she asked her close friend Joe to join them at the Church festivities. Joe was an expert in Serbian folkloric dance and also of Chinese heritage, thus visually quite different from a common Serb. Hence, when the music started and he led Moravac kolo he instantly became a local celebrity. Nada remembers that Joe danced:

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<sup>107</sup> In Serbian for a priest and his wife.



like a wind so literary, all eyes were on him the whole evening. But the funniest thing was when I saw an elderly woman crossing herself largely<sup>108</sup> and saying: “When I go back to my village in Serbia and tell them that the Chinese man led Moravac in Serbian church, nobody will believe me!”

Nada recalls one evening at the Church, when she noticed how mothers, waiting for their children to finish the folk-dance practice, became increasingly restless. She shared her observations with Popadija with the idea to organize an adult folkloric dance group. One thing led to another and Gradina was formed soon after.

### ***The Meaning of the Circle: The Importance of Kolo***

Nada sees her involvement with the folkloric dance as her life calling. As a young person, she completed her studies and graduated as an engineer of landscape architecture and horticulture. She worked in the professional capacity for a decade in Serbia, and continued with that work for a while when the Putniks immigrated to Canada. However, her love for folkloric dance has taken her onto a different path. She acknowledges her husband Radovan as the breadwinner, which allowed her to dedicate her time to her real passion. She laughs when she tells the story when she travelled to Serbia and people asked her about her career in Canada, she told them she teaches folkloric dance:

At first, they were confused, but I explained that was the only career that I will ever pursue. I dedicated my life to folklore! Don't get me wrong, I liked horticulture, but I loved folklore. I thought I could be way more useful to my community with folklore than with anything else. For over fifty years in Canada, I've been dancing. And for most of that time I've been teaching. I love sharing my knowledge with people who are interested in dance in a same or similar way as I am.

Nada admits that many times she has been approached to teach children and she always declined. She wholeheartedly cares about passing her knowledge to the next generation, ensuring her expectations to learn from one another when she is not around (or when she will not be around anymore) are well known. She is also aware that the aging group is extremely dangerous because the knowledge is undocumented and lives in people within the community—when we lose dancers, we gradually lose the repertoire. But still, Nada is clearly not interested in organized children's classes because she believes that most of the children who attend are forced by their parents.

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<sup>108</sup> In Serbian for crossing oneself across the whole torso.



She believes in truthfulness over gain. Even if it means gain for the group, Nada needs to function based on her strong beliefs and values. She speaks about her wish to work with people who have the same yearning for dance as she does. *“I love teaching all ages if they want to learn from me. I just don’t have the energy to force someone to love folklore.”*

Nada fondly speaks about her love and passion for folkloric dance, particularly coming from the Balkan region. She proudly continues with her explanation:

There are two main reasons why the folkloric heritage from the Balkans is specific and unique—firstly, our music and rhythm are not similar to any other culture’s music overtone and secondly, our circle or half-circle formation and chain dancing is by nature inclusive. This type of no-partner dancing is relatively easy to maintain. When the French, Scandinavian, or English dance with their many person formations such as square dance, if one person doesn’t know what to do—the whole dance falls apart. In kolo if one or even more people don’t know how to dance, even if they pull and push and step on other dancers, kolo continues, it does not die and is not ruined. Our kolo never falls apart and that is a big deal!

Nada enthusiastically continues elucidating that on top of our kolo’s ideal formation, we also hold hands. She believes that there is something arcane in the act of holding hands—in the “human touch.” Nada believes that dancers need to connect with the person dancing next to them, to really “feel that person.” The human touch is generally lost as practice, particularly in the West, and she thinks that less people even shake hands when they greet each other. She reminds me how we were expected to “properly” shake hands and we were taught that you can distinguish someone’s character by their handshake [the firmer (but not too strong) the handshake, the “fuller” the human].

She looks at me, widening her eyes, as if she was looking for an approval. I lightly nod and she continues gesturing with her arms.

If you want to learn, to understand kolo, you have to join kolo. You have to dance in kolo to feel kolo. You need to hold hands to feel the rhythm of kolo, to feel the rhythm of all the us, how we dance, how we breathe, how we think.

Nada fondly talks about Dick Crum, a man who was one of the most important people for the treasury of Balkan dances in North America. Born to German and Irish parents and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota, even though he did not have Balkan ancestry, very early he learned about that part of the world and started researching, hungry for more. It was





in the early 1950s when he travelled to Serbia and North Macedonia (then Yugoslavia) and was working closely with Olga Skovran and Dobrivoje Putnik from the National Ensemble Kolo as well as ethnochoreologists Ljubica and Danica Janković who helped him learn from the original sources. Nada affectionately remembers learning from him:

I also learned Veliko Kolo from Dick. That kolo is so special that after all these years I still haven't attempted to teach you at Gradina. For that kolo you truly have to love dancing and exceedingly appreciate the knowledge and importance of every movement and its meaning in that kolo.

Nada blushes slightly out of excitement while continuing her story telling me about learning that kolo from Dick. While teaching his group, Dick tells them that when he decided to travel to Serbia, he was so excited to have the opportunity to learn from the original people who danced Veliko Kolo, but as it turned out, that kolo was so native and authentic that nobody in the cities knew about it. Apparently, Dick had to travel far into rural areas to find people who were still dancing Veliko Kolo and who could teach him—he learned it from Serbian immigrants in the Romanian part of Banat.

Nada's intense and eager enjoyment of Veliko Kolo and Dick as her teacher, justifies the term "enlightenment" for education. She tells a story of how Dick was not only teaching them the steps, he was telling them about his passion for Veliko Kolo, his eagerness to learn more, his disappointment for not finding the right people, his struggles in the foreign country, his happiness when he was on the right way, and his satisfaction when he finally found the village where the people still danced it so he was able to perfect it. Nada shares:

I still cannot come to terms to teach it to you because I am afraid only one or two people will receive it and get the true essence of that kolo. It is meant to be danced with gusto, with ćef from the first step. Small steps, nothing large, as we would for the stage.

### ***The Original or Stage Kolos***

Nada's tone changes as she touches on a heavy topic:

People got used to the large steps when performing. When the National Ensemble Kolo started their work with Skovran and Putnik who consulted sisters Janković, the choreographies performed at the time closely resembled the original rural kolos and steps collected from the field. As the time passed, the audience wanted something more exciting



so eventually, the music became faster, steps larger, knees and arms higher, movements on the stage complex and often hard to follow, she chuckles. Nada continues, speaking faster, visibly distressed with the topic explaining that all original kolos became stylized for stage. The Serbian women, and the men also, but especially women should always be dancing smerno<sup>109</sup>. She unhappily comments that she is aware that when she uses the term “smerno,” it sounds old fashioned. She continues explaining that smerno or humble behaviour is a quality fundamental for our culture—we are not arrogant by nature. She uses the example when she teaches kolo Vranjanka, she insists that we do not wiggle our hips. Nada chuckles and I join her. We laugh as she exaggerates the movements in the hips.

That looks unrestrained, rampant, provocative. That is not the sense of this dance. Women from Vranje are compassionate, serene, feminine, smart, assertive and they don't attract attention to their bodies. When they dance, they don't twist their pelvises rather, they perfected the skill to sway with their ankles. Smerno, dignified, respectful. Our traditional knowledge, behavior, existence, being in the world.

Nada lowers her tone as she is saying something that she should not be stating loudly, slightly leaning forward.

Those are the things that you can still learn, but are becoming more difficult. Because what we see in kolos nowadays is less and less smerno—steps are larger and music is faster. Everybody runs and jumps high and while that is attractive for the audience, that is not how we were made to dance. That is why we should always refer to our traditional wardrobe—there is no way women can lift their legs that high in heavy underskirts and tight “litaks” made of thick and harsh wool.

She tells of a story how she consulted for one of the KUD<sup>110</sup> in Serbia and when they were working on Skopska Crnogorka choreography, they did not include a single original step. The whole choreography consisted of running across the stage and jumping trokorak<sup>111</sup>. Nada makes a sad face proclaiming that the dance was awful. She continues the story with an even lower and deeper voice. She shares that she advised the choreographer about the authenticity, but he reluctantly commented the authenticity was not what the audience wants. Apparently if they did not offer something popular,

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<sup>109</sup> In Serbian for humbly.

<sup>110</sup> Kulturno Umetničko Društvo (KUD)—Cultural and Artistic Society.

<sup>111</sup> In Serbian for the basic triple-step.



their ticket sales would go down, which in turn would jeopardize the club's financial health and with that, the existence of their club.

### ***It Is What Serbs Would Say: It Fills the Soul***

I have been dancing with Nada for years and her enthusiasm for dance does not subside, on the contrary, the longer I know her the more she gets involved in folkloric dance. Nada's husband Radovan teasingly comments, "*My wife could be sick the whole week but on Wednesdays she goes to dance.*" He asks her why she jumps and dances that hard, and she tells him—she has to! That is the thing which fills the soul! Nada has a severe osteoarthritis condition and because of that she has constant pain in her wrists and ankles.

The only time I feel better is when I dance. I love going to our dances on Wednesdays as that is the time that I am pain-free and when I can fill my soul so the other six days of the week it will be easier to manage.

Nada smiles and lifts her arms in the air as her gesture would explain everything there is to it. I cannot shake the feeling that she expects me to profoundly understand everything that she has been trying to teach me and the rest of the dancers at Gradina. Maybe we will one day, but I sense there is so much more to understand. For now, based on this interview and her teachings, I understand that this is who we are: we dance. We dance for weddings, we dance for funerals, it is in our blood. In kolo we share the happiness and sorrow, we heal. In kolo we love. In kolo we live. It is about a profound love of and for.

### **Selena Rakočević, Department of Ethnomusicology, Belgrade, Serbia**

The Resavska street is one of the central and the most beautiful streets in Belgrade, characterized by many old residential buildings with cafés, restaurants, and boutiques located on the street level. Many of the buildings were built on top of the old Turkish structures, on uneven terrain—uphill towards the St. Marko church and downhill toward the renowned Central Railway Station. Most of these buildings belong to the transitional style of 19th century Belgrade's architecture, with the facades revealing the influence of Western Europe. In front of these hundreds-of-years old buildings both sidewalks are surrounded by beautiful poplar tree alleys. There are several buildings



with decorative elements of academicism on the facade and iron balconies in the Empire style, but it is hard to distinguish the details as they are mostly hidden by the summer-time dense canopies—ceilings of leaves and tree branches.

It is difficult to walk on the sidewalks because more than half of the space is occupied by parked cars. Even so, walking on a hot summer day is only bearable in the thick shades close to the buildings. The tram lines that pass through the Resavska Street further emanate the romantic impression of the city. Just across the street, the first Belgrade's department store "Beogradjanka"<sup>112</sup>, once the tallest building in the city, still elegantly dominates the neighbourhood. On the other side of the corner is the Student's Cultural Centre, a place once immensely popular (and where I spent most of my youth)—a bastion of progressive ideas, subcultural and underground expression in all areas of art, as well as a place where nonconforming political views and opinions could be heard.

The Faculty of Music is right around the corner, and I presume that is why Selena suggested we meet in the area. This faculty is the oldest and one of the most eminent higher education institutions in the field of art in Serbia and in the region. It was founded in 1937 as the Academy of Music, and today it is the largest faculty within the University of Arts in Belgrade. The faculty employs almost two hundred professors and teaching associates, eminent artists, scientists and excellent pedagogues, experts in the field of music as well as the science and the art of music.

As I walk towards the café, I think about the topics I have prepared to discuss with Selena such as traditions—some that date thousands of years ago, some hundreds, and some that are more recent. Certain traditions come from the rural areas, while specific ones are based on the urban settings. I notice the difference in the way of being here in Serbia and among Serbs elsewhere in the diaspora. I am curious how Selena will explain the difference, or if she will even notice it. Generally, it is challenging for one to *know* who did not experience it intimately, *na svojoj koži*<sup>113</sup>, we would say.

It is over 40 degrees outside and people are moving very slowly in this heat. I hope that the café we chose is air-conditioned and we will be able to relax and discuss

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<sup>112</sup> In Serbian for a woman from Belgrade.

<sup>113</sup> In Serbian for "On your own skin." [my translation].



Serbian folklore. Cafés are extremely popular in Belgrade and often visited—there is a strong culture of frequent socializing especially outside of the home. I arrive much earlier, because I want to ensure I find a table tucked in the corner where we can have an hour or so of undisturbed time.

### ***A Dancer Who Knows Research***

Selena arrives seemingly unaffected by the heat. Her hair and outfit are in perfect shape, despite the fact that she had several meetings prior to ours. Selena speaks softly, emphasizing every few words typical for somebody who has been teaching for years. She is an articulate woman with strongly developed listening techniques which makes her an enjoyable converser.

In my conversation with Selena, it became clear, almost immediately, that dance is her calling. She enthusiastically speaks about her involvement with dance, with music, and how that passion developed into career in academics, and particularly, ethnochoreology. She shares that one thing she enjoys more than dancing is researching about it, and we start talking about her article: “Ethnochoreology as an Interdisciplinary in a Postdisciplinary Era: A Historiography of Dance Scholarship in Serbia” (Rakočević 2015a). I remind her of her words:

Although ethnochoreology as an independent scholarly discipline should maintain a constant and vibrant relationship with global trends in related fields of study, I want to argue that understanding its specific disciplinary context, which is distinct from other approaches to dance research, can be a productive way of developing a distinctive field of dance knowledge in both national and global spheres. (p. 29)

She smiles broadly, strengthens her back and inhales deeply before she begins clarifying:

So, this work was created because I firmly believe in ethnochoreology and I am, I admit, limited in that. That is it—my observation, narrow, limited. I am fully aware of that, but despite that, I am fighting for it. European countries, especially Eastern Europe, have constructed, created certain scientific disciplines, scholarly disciplines, such as ethnomusicology. I fight for ethnochoreology in our and in the European circles, especially, because it has given us visibility in the scientific community. For one very specific type of knowledge. I know that it is simply impossible on the global level since ethnochoreology does not exist in America or Canada, but in Europe, I think it is important thus I



fight for scholarly specific knowledge that is focused on dance knowledge.

### ***Intergenerational Learning in Classrooms***

As I describe my work and my research to Selena, she listens patiently and occasionally keenly nods. She smiles and comments how impressed she is with me as someone who immigrated so long ago and is interested in our traditional knowledge and particularly folklore as a modality. Her casual soft voice deepens as she begins speaking about her perspective of the current state of folklore. As she speaks, she leans forward and only occasionally leans against the high burgundy leather backrest of the booth where we are comfortably seated. Selena acknowledges the differences between her perspective as an ethnochoreologist and mine as an educator, and she remarks that she trusts that I will be able to extract the valued information for my research.

She smiles and begins describing the folklore studies in Serbia:

Traditional dance, or folklore as we colloquially refer to it, has not been the regular subject in mainstream education yet. Teaching methodology of traditional dance has not been developed at all. There are advances in that area, some ethnochoreology doctorate students are researching educational approaches as well, but it is still in its infancy. One of my students currently works on the traditional approach of structural analysis of the movements and dances performed in the three community dance clubs she was researching. Based on the realization of the dance structures, she set up a hierarchy of quality—the methodology is more or less successful when the realization is more or less successful.

She offers clarification swiftly nodding her head—realization as performance. Selena continues talking about the importance of intergenerational learning. She explains that in many ways, folklore as a traditional folk or people practice has been taken out of context from, for example, rural areas and villages and inserted into urban classrooms as a way to preserve it. That has been recognized in extracurricular activities in community dance clubs, and only recently as part of the mainstream education as well:

There is a centre in Kikinda, it is a vocational school, so there is no rank of the university, training early childhood educators and primary grades teachers. Within that vocational school, there is a department for educators for folk dance. The idea was when the department was founded that would prepare educators for folk dance as specialists in the field. Thus, they should be trained to teach our traditional dances to preschool children, before primary school.



Selena sighs and explains that the program was launched recently and has very low enrollment. Not enough students are interested in this program because the Ministry of Education in Serbia do not recognize this specialty. Selena also shares that this is essentially every post-secondary administrator's and professor's worst nightmare—due to the declining birth rate in the country for the last several decades, post-secondary institutions now experience a decline in enrollment, and are in a position to compete for every student.

### ***The Importance of Research in Context: Learning from Kolo***

We continue talking about her work. I invite her to speak about her article: “Music, Dance, and Memory: Towards a Deliberation of Field Research of Dance” (Rakočević, 2015b) and her argument that we must “be aware that the dance recorded outside the authentic social context of its performance is not only an insufficient source of information but also a kind of pre-channeled knowledge transfer” (p. 19). Selena explains that the idea for the article resulted from the need for a dialogue and recalculation of this field research methodology that our predecessors practiced:

The researchers would go to the field, for example to southeastern Serbia, to Pirot, and look for elders only. Since the assumption of the Janković sisters' folkloristic paradigm of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, the researchers adopted the approach that only the 'oldest gray heads' preserve the highest quality of traditional knowledge.

As she speaks about this evidently important issue, Selena becomes excited. Her voice becomes stronger and she speaks faster.

For decades we operated under the assumption that the source of the traditional knowledge, which is folklore, is hidden only in the past, in 'gray heads' only. But the reality is not like that. In fact, even while we transfer the knowledge with every word and every step, we give our perspective and our point of view, the knowledge is within every person who dances kolo.

Selena speaks about her field trips with her mentor Dr. Olivera Vasić, a giant of Serbian ethnochoreology, and her tone softens again when she shares how grateful she was to have the opportunity to work with her. Selena sighs heavily and continues telling a story about their travels. She speaks in a stronger tone when she talks about how the two of them travelled to the field to explore traditional dances of Serbia. For example, the Stara



Planina<sup>114</sup> area with unbelievably diverse culture where every village has their own take on music, rituals, and especially kolos. Selena and Olivera would always be on the lookout for elderly people in the mountains who would still remember the songs and kolos. Even if they were advanced in age and often could not get up from their chairs, they would still be considered as knowledge holders. As such they would do their best to pass on their knowledge, or the memory of it—the memory of dances from their youth.

Selena presents discontent about the way they conducted research before. She shakes her head as she does not believe the inaccuracies they made in the field work. She explains that at the time the assumption was that knowledge passed by elders was better and cleaner, more Serbian, more traditional, and as such it must be preserved. They did not pay any attention to the contemporary folkloric dances:

Are kolos people dance nowadays worthless? We would interview elderly people all day, and then we'd go back to Pirot, and there would be igranka<sup>115</sup>, but we wouldn't attend because we were exhausted and because we did not find it important.

Selena acknowledges that the dance knowledge they were collecting at the time was pre-channeled, anticipated—asking the elderly to say what one wants or expects to hear. As we continue discussing the knowledge transfer and Selena explains the difference between her earlier methods and what they practice now:

Before I would go when it was convenient for me, when my schedule allowed, and I'd stay for five, six days visiting homes and recording dances by talking and not dancing. If I ask my interlocutors to show me the steps or a full dance, then we don't have the appropriate music, then they sing or hum the melody, demonstrate something but are all inadequate. I'd record it on camera, and then analyse it step by step and pass it on to the students. Thus, not very accurate and definitely not enough. Now, when I go, I go directly to igranka, I go purposely. And then I record them dancing to their own music. If I have more questions, the following day I'd seek interlocutors to clarify things, steps.

Selena and I continue discussing how we recognize that the knowledge is always channeled, but at least kolos recorded nowadays is within the context. The people that dance those kolos nowadays have learned from the “gray heads,” knowledge keepers,

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<sup>114</sup> In Serbian for Balkan Mountains range.

<sup>115</sup> In Serbian for dance party at the local community centre.





and that knowledge was passed generationally. While it is expected that kolos, steps, rituals, wardrobe, and the rest of basic culture elements are slightly modified with every new generation, the fundamental values change on a much slower rate, or some never do.

### ***Building Diverse Community***

When I arrive at the question about community building, Selena's face shows traces of disappointment that is quickly replaced by determination. She begins explaining:

In our ethnochoreology, particularly Janković sisters, almost all of the texts start with: 'Forms of our folk dances, our folk dances, where our folk dances mean only Serbian. Their research is another well-channeled source of knowledge. They were recording mainly Serbian dances, kolos. Thus, if a person tells you: I dance Rčenica<sup>116</sup> very well, often they would not be interested, because it's not "our" dance. The ideology at the time was based on building the national identity of all folklore studies in Europe, and especially in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, I believe we should research everything.

Selena looks deeply in my eyes as she speaks about national identity. I feel the intensity of this topic—Serbia and Serbian people went through many hardships throughout the decades, to say the least, if not centuries, defending their land, culture, heritage<sup>117</sup>, and national pride is interwoven in every part of everyday life.

Selena continues sharing that while she is nacionalno osveščena<sup>118</sup>, she is professionally interested in the other neighbouring cultures such as Romanian, as well. She is adamant that one needs to explore dance in its context and that is what needs to be taught in the ethnochoreology classrooms. Selena admits that her realization and decisions had drastically influenced her choice of field research as well as her study interest.

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<sup>116</sup> Typical Bulgarian kolo.

<sup>117</sup> See Kolo Ends and Begins Again section.

<sup>118</sup> In Serbian for nationally conscious (dedicated, aware).



I eagerly draw on this opening to further my inquiry by bringing up an authentic social context example of igranka at the Serbian church in Vancouver. Selena's face lights up:

I would very much like to be a fly-on-a-wall at the Serbian Church in Vancouver to record what those who identify as Orthodox Serbs dance nowadays. What kolos do they dance? What is so important to them so that they go to Serbian church even if they live in Canada? It is important to Serbs in diaspora: when people go to Serbian church, they are constructing their identities at the moment of that dance, that kolo. Now, how do they construct that identity? They construct it through those kolos, like our predecessors have been for ages. However, I ask about the repertoire: who influences what will they dance, what kolos will the band play? What are the channels of power, who will pay for that music, who will negotiate with the band about the repertoire, who orders, who pays, how does one follow the money trail and the power relationship in general?

Selena exhales, and while smiling, sinks deeper into the backrest. She appears fatigued, and I am cognizant of the time passed. The conversation turns toward the stage performances and Selena offers her vision. She emphasizes that while she researches and teaches the traditional form of dance, she also acknowledges the work our choreographers are doing with the stage performances in both amateur and professional dance clubs. She also passionately speaks about the difference between the folk-wardrobe<sup>119</sup> and stage costume:

When we are on stage we act. We become someone else. We show Serbian folk costumes on the stage and as part of the performance. That's why the clothing stops being folk-wardrobe and becomes a costume. The term folk-wardrobe was also constructed. With the study of ethnology and folk art, particularly the clothing items, the term folk-wardrobe was created.

Selena continues referencing the period between the two world wars when ethnology in Serbia, or at the time the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, gained momentum. At the time the term was rooted, choreographers insisted what was shown on the stage was ideal because they supposedly presented the "real" Serbia. Naturally, the folk-wardrobe was part of the whole constructed ethnologic package. It is a stylistic ethnic art. When a choreography is presented on stage, it becomes an artistic performance of Serbian traditional dance, kolo. The ideal Serbian person is "born" on stage. Since both of us

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<sup>119</sup> Narodne nošnje.



have performed in the folkloric dances on stage, Selena and I discuss that further. When performers wear those folk costumes on stage, they represent the ideal Serbian, Romanian, North Macedonian persons, and knowingly or subconsciously, they increasingly adopt the values that those cultures and traditional knowledges offer.

### ***A Ritual of Joy***

We talk about rituals and we both agree how dance cannot be separated from the ritualistic practices. Selena shares how she has started thinking about the concept of a ritual of joy. It could be problematic to distinguish ritual from dance because dance is part of every Serbian gathering. She passionately throws her hand in the air asking what is joy, then. Selena laughs at her gesture and continues discussing her work on a concept of a ritual of joy, and how dance is certainly an inseparable part of that ritual.

Selena and I spent most of the afternoon together. She takes me for a tour of the Faculty of Music, we go for a walk to the Ethnographic Museum. The time spent with her is significant for my research, and as a parting gift, she advises me to consider the following discussion questions, which she also asks herself and other fellow researchers:

What are the advantages of personal kinetic/auditory experience during simultaneous perception of dance movement and dance music? How can different methods of field research be combined in order to improve cognitive processes? Are there border areas between ethnochoreological and ethnomusicological fieldwork? Does the variety of methods of field research represent a weakness of the interdisciplinary approach or its advantage? On which information recorded during the fieldwork does the researcher usually build his post-field ethnochoreological/ethnomusical narratives? (Rakočević, 2015b, p. 64)

As the end argument of her article, Selena offered that “the researcher must be aware of their decisions at all times and re-examine them over and over again in a continuous dialogic relationship”<sup>120</sup> (Rakočević, 2015b, p. 61). Going further from Selena’s recommendation, and more than I realized at the time, the aforementioned questions have re-directed me toward the particulars of my study that I initially pursued, but was

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<sup>120</sup> “Истраживач мора у сваком тренутку да буде свестан својих одлука и да их у непрекидном дијалошком односу увек изнова преиспитује.” [my translation].



somewhat interrupted along the way. With this timely reminder, I am able to reorient and go back to my wayfinding through the landscapes of my inquiry.

**Ruth Hunter,  
Drómeno Band, Seattle, USA**

I belong to the Northwest Balkan social media group: It is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the cultural arts of the Balkans in the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia). The group is particularly well-known for organizing the Balkan Night Northwest, celebrated on the first weekend in March, which I have attended several times. The Drómeno band and its members are instrumental in organizing and leading this annual event, and through that event I have learned about the Labour weekend Balkanalia, the three-day-long weekend folkloric camp.

The Camp Angelos, Conference & Retreat Center where the Balkanalia is organized, is located less than 40 kilometers from downtown Portland in the foothills of Mountain Hood. The organizers advertise the camp as an opportunity to enjoy three idyllic days with an incredible gathering of campers, musicians, dancers, and singers, which is just the beginning of the description of this fantastic gathering. To people who are new to Balkan culture, attending a camp comes as close as possible to an authentic experience for which they would otherwise have to travel across the world. Attendees are encouraged to join dancing, singing, and playing music classes for adults, youth, and children. These groups are not necessarily divided by age, but rather by the interests in the repertoire. However, if attendees prefer, they can spend their days playing sports, lounging on the beach of the Sandy River, or enjoying the picturesque nature around them. The camp is run by volunteers from the Greek Orthodox community of Oregon and all attendees are expected to contribute to the volunteer duties.

I first heard Drómeno play at one of the events in Vancouver, organized by my friend's band Šljivovica<sup>121</sup>, a brass band dedicated to Balkans' traditional songs and music. I was amazed by the sophisticated, yet raw Drómeno's sound, and was immediately drawn toward them. The band consists of the Govetas family: Greek-born

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<sup>121</sup> In Serbian for plum brandy.



husband Christos, American wife Ruth, and their children Eleni and Bobby, both in their early twenties, along with a fifth member Nikos. As a band, Dróméno is recognized and celebrated throughout the US and in Greece because they represent the holders of musical tradition. As a family, the Govetas are acknowledged and respected as holders of Balkan's traditional music, customs, rituals, cuisine, family and community relations. They are well accepted and they welcome everyone in the community. Even though I have only met them a few times at different events, they have shown amazing enthusiasm toward my research topic and extended their generous support.

I chose to speak with Ruth first. I have chatted with Christos many times and have learned about his focused approach toward traditional music and his specific way to interpret and perform it. In addition to Ruth's profession as a musician and all other aspects that role requires, she is also an English high school teacher, a position that gives her a certain roundness that not too many people can understand. There are many similarities that her jobs have in common (an educator during a day, and a traditional music performer at night), but there are also differences that carve out possibilities to practice new skills. For example, in her role as a teacher in a public school, Ruth is expected to accept the provisions of the system, such as the proposed curriculum, a quality that is sometimes desired in communal teaching practice. Or, in her role as a music performer in the Greek community, she often needs to satisfy several stakeholders with opposing perspectives, such as elders as knowledge holders, youth, parents in the traditional Greek community, which is a quality often celebrated in the mainstream system. Her experience in both realms provides her with the knowledge that she can implement in either one.

Ruth and I decided to meet on a porch in front of the main lodge. I arrive first and sit facing the entrance so I can admire the inside of the 5,700 square foot Kalamata Lodge, a focal point of the entire camp. Its spectacular woodwork, a two-story high open-beamed ceiling, a massive wood-burning stone fireplace positioned at the centre of a full glass back-wall create an extraordinary combination of a modern elegance with a rustic ambience. Just being in this magnificent space situated in a forest, between a mountain and a river is creating a whimsical mood.

I see Ruth rushing toward the porch. We greet each other by kissing two times on the cheeks. She sits comfortably in a large wicker chair with a burgundy cushion. She



faces the large grass field where Dróméno performed the night before. I was there, dancing on the wet evening grass in my new leather opanci<sup>122</sup> that I brought from Serbia earlier this summer. It felt “right” being there, dancing and holding hands, feeling the coolness of the late summer dusk, absorbed by the sounds of zurlas, moved by the rhythm of kolo.

I see Ruth’s daughter Eleni walking by the porch, preoccupied by her thoughts, with a set of large headphones on her head. She suddenly notices her mother and me talking. She slows down and looks at me curiously. She approaches us slowly and then swiftly slips into a large leather armchair next to us. Seemingly uninterested, I see her listening to every word. From time to time, she turns toward us and her face lights up. When Ruth mentions Bobby’s successes, Eleni rolls her eyes “loudly.” Both Ruth and I laugh. Ruth is very relaxed. She acknowledges Eleni when she joins us, but remains focused on our conversation. I cannot decide if that quality should be attributed to her as a performer or a high school teacher. Potentially both— a combination of her personal and professional life and her disposition. After a while, Eleni decides to leave. She nods in our general direction, not at either one of us, but acknowledging both, and leaves quietly, careful not to interrupt or disturb us. I feel privileged witnessing this beautiful close relationship among the Govetas family members. Their emotional connection feels practically tangible. I can almost see the family ties stretched across the camp between Ruth, Christos, Eleni, and Bobby.

### ***Immersion, Involvement, Engagement***

Ruth and I talk about her beginnings, what brought her to Balkan music, her life now, her professional and personal story. She tells me about her family, not very close extended family, about her stepfather, who was an anthropologist and her mother a musician. Thanks to her stepfather, Ruth developed an awareness of cultural anthropology and from her mother, appreciation for diversity in music. Ruth was interested in learning languages from a very young age and particularly fond of different writing systems, which in her opinion, contributed to her love for the Balkan region that encompasses all that variety. Although she grew up in Hawaii, Ruth was not immersed in Hawaiian traditional culture, but rather in Eastern European culture, because of her

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<sup>122</sup> In Serbian for traditional footwear.



devoted school teacher who featured cultures of the world and fancied Balkan music and dance. As a result of that early immersion, Ruth taught herself to play guitar (later tambura) and was in her early 20s when she was hired to play at a Mendocino Balkan Music and Dance Camp in California. She learned about West Coast Balkan Music & Dance camp at Mendocino Woodlands in California and she started attending regularly. She met Christos at one of the events, and the rest is history. Her life was forever tied to the culture in which she was not born, but rather accepted as her own.

### ***The Small Family Within the Large One***

When I asked Ruth about the folklore, she immediately started talking about the community, as if that has been on her mind all along:

I have a very complicated view of what folklore is and how it functions. First and foremost, I look at our family—it's really the communal aspect of folklore, the community, that is important. The Balkan music and dance camp stopped being a 'fantasy' week and became a real community. Because you can build a real community. That doesn't have to be random. The community is real and it's there, here. And it's ongoing and it's not only a week somewhere anymore. It is beyond that. You can get to the camp for five or ten years and not know what people do for a living, but still connect with them on a profound level. When people got sick and people died and some needed help, the community responded immediately. Then you know what your community is made of, when stuff like that happens. When times are hard.

Ruth carefully shares these words with me. She speaks slowly as if she weighs every word, and then carefully placing them on a platter in front of us. It feels as she is serving loukoumades<sup>123</sup> or any other dessert for us to snack on while chatting. I take her words attentively and try to savour the taste they leave in me. She continues:

For me, folklore builds community, and we build the community, and I see the way that it kept us and our kids in. If we were just a nuclear family and we were on our own, that would not happen. We would not have the same support. For example, the second generation, people who are in their 30s now who respected Christos and me when we were younger, became our kids' idols. So, they had to keep the space in their imagination for us because they knew that these people respected us. That's another community part that is immensely important.

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<sup>123</sup> Greek donuts served soaked in hot honey syrup, sprinkled with cinnamon and garnished with chopped walnuts or toasted sesame seeds.



## ***Learning the “Real” Music***

In addition to her American experience, Ruth is quite familiar with the current practices in Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and other neighbouring Balkan countries. Most of Christos family still lives in Greece and the Govetas have kept very strong ties with that part of the world, far beyond their professional music needs. Over the years, not only have they developed close friendships with American people with Balkan roots, but also with people living in Balkan countries. Ruth shares her observations:

I see what is happening in Greece and in Bulgaria and in other neighbouring places with folklore. When you try to teach the music, you change it. It becomes a different thing, but if you don't teach it, it could become a museum thing and not a living thing. The way it lives now it's faster, it changes faster, because you got other influences, you've got the internet, you got ease of access, every different sound and the style is changing. The way that functions in Greece it's really interesting. They have music colleges now. And some of the youth create bands and they sound real! “Real” and those are young people! They didn't necessarily grow up with it and absorb it in the way that you would hope in the perfect world, but they learn how to make it their own and make it real. It is astounding!

Ruth speaks in an enthusiastic voice and she accentuates the word “real.” I ask for clarification and she confirms that when she says “real” she means “authentic.” Because the Govetas as a band have explored the depths of traditional Greek music, Ruth can confidently discuss the notion of “real music.”

Real is authentic, but in a loose enough way so it allows room for improvisation and interpretation of an artist. It's like a language, music is like a language: you either play with an accent or you don't. We try to learn a dialect of a village so we would be playing real—without the accent.

They have been following the trails of this musical expression ending up in rural areas of Greece and North Macedonia, where the music and dances reach all the way back to the ancient time and do not comply with modern borders. In Ruth's words, some of the deepest soul-music is found in the mountains of Ipiros, near Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek pantheon. They found that the traditional music, as many other Greek arts forms such as Greek comedy and tragedy, reaches into primal emotional spaces of joy and grief. But even the most devoted musicians like Dróméno who try to preserve the





authenticity of the music, will inevitably change the music over time. And the same applies to dance. Ruth explains:

In real, authentic folklore, there is a high chance for change. The music is changing, because, well, nothing stays the same. If you listen to the people when they played in the 1920s, it's not the same as the way people play now. And the way people play now is still authentic. In the last 10–20 years, in many areas of Greece, the music has been diluted to the point that cannot be called traditional anymore. Many areas that people can easily access are visited by musicians interested in that type of music or collaborations—and that is how the music is diluted. But in the mountains, it's not, it's still real. When I say real, there are families that transfer their knowledge from generation to generation—their grandfather plays and they play. Most of the time when you go to the festivals in Greece the people who know different dances learn them at dance schools, because they didn't grow up in families or extended families who carried those traditions. Because people don't grow up in the village anymore.

Ruth tells Christos' story, how they have a friend who is a beautiful singer and who is also Christos' idol. He and Christos are quite similar, they did not come from musical families, they learned how to play traditional music by listening to the radio, which is not too different from somebody like Ruth all the way from the USA, who was also interested in Greek music and was learning by herself. Ruth shares that their friend knows the repertoire from every village from the region. She describes him as a master of ornamented and complex singing, and although he is not Vlach but his wife is Vlach, he sings in a very Vlach style:

Playing the music is beautiful, but that's only the first level of being a musician. One also wants that special interaction with the audience. Christos' friend knows exactly what song they like in this village and what they like in that village and what to sing for what audience. How to play and hit the right tones and notes and all that in an appropriate dialect. It's quite complex and very different from place to place.

### ***Losing Dance Tradition***

Ruth shuffles in her chair and she looks as if she is becoming agitated with her own thoughts. She adjusts herself and starts to tell another story:

I'll talk about Zurla music. Up until quite recently, it was played exclusively by Romani people and the music is directly derived from the Turkish. So, the names of the tunes are Turkish, some of the dances are Turkish, but of course they are idiosyncratic from the villages. There are so many prejudices against the Romani people, and yet they are carrying a tradition that doesn't exist outside of them playing it. And it



is required, necessary, to pass that tradition, but unless Romani people do it, there will be nobody else. However, they are still systematically mistreated. People hire them to play and it's not always all bad, because people are pretty respectful and tip a lot but it is interesting that this is how the tradition is held, passed.

Ruth continues telling the American story. Her voice changes and she looks at me almost apologetically when she boldly declares that in [North] America we have lost dance tradition. According to Ruth that was accomplished mainly by eradicating the extended family and community and promoting the nuclear family only:

I teach in a high school where we have over 2000 kids and we organize assemblies. For a couple of years, we were getting visits from a dance troupe from Japan and they were doing Obon dancing. They would bring big drums and all. And at the end of one assembly, they invited everyone who wanted to dance, and everybody flooded the dance floor. Kids need to dance. There is that desire to move that people have. If we look at little kids, we can see that all they do is dance. And they hear the music physically. It's the natural human need. It is a need. And it dawned on me that these poor kids didn't have the opportunity. It's the way to connect without the words. You don't have to have thoughts. Remove the thoughts. Dance is meditative. Of course, we have an epidemic of anxiety and depression among youth—everybody is isolated.

### ***Who are the “Folk” in Folklore?***

The conversation with Ruth runs smooth as an easy kolo. I feel the positive energy and enthusiasm in her every word. She is not only a passionate musician and a devoted teacher, but she is a very engaged community member and a friend and that quality shines from every sentence and every topic that we discuss. We start talking about ethnicity, about folklore, stories that we carry and tell our children, who the Balkan nations are. Ruth sighs heavily, explaining that the line between identity and nationalism is very fine, and quickly adds that she loves everything about identity and hates everything about nationalism.

Because when you are someone who is not just in one, and when you see all the regional variations, just like the language—if you speak Serbian and when you listen to Bosnian and Macedonian, then Bulgarian and other dialects, you can tell from the sounds where someone is from. And it is exactly the same with the music. You can tell that the dance that is done all over the place is stemming from the Albanian community, from the Greek Macedonian, because there are differences. And if you are someone who is far enough removed to see all that stuff, you can see there is a continuum—there is no border. Of course, there are borders, but there is a continuum between this regional cultural area. And that's what makes us really excited, that connection, so you



see the connection between people but as you know, governments use folklore education to support nationalism. And not only the government, but the church and other rigid communities.

Shaking her head faintly, as she does not believe in a positive outcome, Ruth continues sharing that perhaps communities could attempt to separate religion from folklore and tradition because there are some people who do not necessarily believe in God but would like to continue their traditional customs, knowledge, rituals, etc. Alas, we both understand that religion and tradition are so tightly interwoven that it would be absolutely impossible to separate the two. I remind her that following WWII, Tito<sup>124</sup> has tried that approach, but less than fifty years later, the suppression of religion has resulted in the Bosnian war. We look at each other, sadly remembering the atrocities of that war.

### ***Dance as a Spirit That Lifts***

Ruth smiles and continues talking about dance. She is resolute that we need to continue passing our passion and love for music and dance to the young generations with or without Balkan roots. She talks about her involvement with the Balkan Dance Café and she is a firm believer that the door needs to be open, that we should never intimidate people. She also believes that music and dance is about group experience and only when we are together, we can experience it as it was intended—for a community. She shares a story when she and Christos went to her first festival in Greece:

We drove down at 9 pm, we could hear the zurnas playing, and I got chills. It was so exciting. We get there and everyone was ignoring the zurna players—nobody was dancing, they were all eating. And finally at midnight, they stood up to start dancing! The dancing there isn't about your physical body, it's not about the steps that you do, it's not about any of that; it's about your soul becoming ready to lift your body out of the chair. It's about social gathering, experience. At first you listen while eating and enjoying your company, then you can talk and maybe sing a little. Then you dance and all of that with kefi. With soul.

She laughs explaining that was one of the first cultural shocks since she was used to the American style of being hasty.

We want things to be fast and efficient and when the music starts, we want to dance, we want to dance every dance, we want variety, we want acquisition of all dances and songs. Greeks, on the other hand, don't

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<sup>124</sup> Josip Broz Tito, the former President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.



want variety, they want to dance their four dances they know and they are happy.

We both laugh and we acknowledge our different upbringings and ways of understanding joy, happiness, spirit, soul. But we also acknowledge that we are able to appreciate our differences precisely because of our shared passion and love toward the general culture that includes so many variations impossible to list. Suddenly, someone opened the door and the music of Moravac<sup>125</sup> spread from the main lodge. Ruth and I looked at each other, both richer in a friend and a “sister in arms,” we join kolo.

**Benji Rifati,  
Melez Band, Graton, USA**

Still at Camp Angelos, I arranged with Benji to meet on the terrace behind the main lodge, opposite of the front porch where I had interviewed Ruth. At this time of the evening, the terrace is much quieter than the porch since the main celebrations are happening at the main lodge and the field in front of it. That field is well lit, which allows musicians to take the party outside sometimes. The visitors of the Balkanalia seem to favour dancing outside, under the stars. I imagine it might connect them to the roots they are rediscovering through music and dance.

I am repentant for booking time with Benji during the evening igranka, but that was the only time of the day when he was not already booked with the other camp activities. Benji is teaching and leading the youth band at the camp and is going above and beyond his duties as a teacher. In a very natural, casual manner, he assumes the part of a role model, an influencer, and a cultural trendsetter which takes up a lot of his time. With his very “cool” and trendy demeanor, the youth at the camp and otherwise connect with him instantly. A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to witness similar behavior at the event I attended with my daughters and their friend. Among other bands, Benji’s band “Melez Band” played that evening, and Benji performed his famous solo. The girls, at the time in their tween years and not involved in this particular type of music, were fascinated by Benji’s performance. I observed how his love and passion managed to break the age barrier, spark the girls’ interest, and encourage them to

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<sup>125</sup> Serbian kolo from Šumadija region.



receive the music from the other direction which does not include their “nagging” parents.

Benji is the youngest of my collocutors, but his communication style extends well beyond his age. As I approach the terrace, Benji is already at the table with two glasses of water in front of him. When he sees me coming toward him, he swiftly gets up and extends his hand in my direction to greet me.

### ***Story as Old as Time***

I tell Benji about my study and ask him to tell me about himself and his involvement with folklore, and particularly Balkan music and dance. He begins by telling the story of his parents’ love. His mother is from America, born in Los Angeles, and her family roots are Russian Jewish—her grandparents immigrated from Russia and Lithuania back in the late 1800’s. She was living in Amsterdam during the late 80’s. Benji’s father, Roma from Kosovo, was living in Italy at the time. They met at a popular Romanian Roma band concert and fell in love. In the early 1990s they moved to the United States where Benji was born.

### ***Building Roma Community***

Benji emphasizes the fact that at first, his parents lived in the Serbian province of Kosovo with Benji’s father’s family. However, as the conflicts increased in Kosovo, life became unbearable and they managed to escape:

My mother had some resources to help them get out of Kosovo and my relatives were able to flee the war-torn country, and they all immigrated to western Europe. Originally, they took a boat to Croatia or Montenegro, then they went to Italy. From there, they split up, so one of my father’s brothers stayed in Italy, and the rest of the three brothers went to Germany including my dad’s mother who lived in Germany until she passed away a couple of years ago.

Benji tells this story without any confusion in his voice, as if he repeated it many times. While he never mentions intergenerational trauma, by his readiness to disclose some intimate details of his story it is evident that this was a frequent topic in his family. Even though he was born and raised far away from the rest of the family, Benji speaks fondly of them:



I love my family, just as much as my cousins here in America, even though I haven't spent nearly as much time with them as I do with my family in America, so I try to go out to see them as much as possible. And I was very, very close to my grandmother on my father's side.

Benji's voice softens when he speaks about his grandmother:

When I was four to five, she lived with us in our house in California, and at the time I was fluent in the Roma language since she didn't speak any English, so that was the only form of communication between us. Since she passed, I don't have an opportunity to speak as much, so I've lost some of it. I have a desire to learn the language completely, but there aren't resources for Romanes like there are for Serbian or Macedonian, so I can't really study it in a formal setting. I have to rely on going there and talking to my family in Romanes as much as possible so I can pick the language up more and more.

Benji is very socially conscious and he is a proud member of the Roma community. He acknowledges that the biggest part of identifying as a Rom comes from his father. Benji's voice deepens and his eyes sparkle even more when he talks about his father. It is refreshing to see a child being proud of their parent. Benji tells the story of how his parents, mainly his father, started a non-profit organization called Voice of Roma. The organization has been operating since 1996 and their mission is to "promote and present Romani cultural arts and traditions in a way that counters both romanticized and negative 'Gypsy' stereotypes, and in so doing, to contribute to the preservation of Romani identity and culture" (Voice of Roma, 2019, para. 2). In addition to challenging systemic racism and discrimination toward Roma, the organization has also raised funds for Roma people in eastern Europe, as well as organized music festivals featuring Roma music and musicians.

Benji shares how his parents were very open minded to both cultures—American and Roma. He remembers how his parents offered him to play an instrument and he picked up the trumpet:

My parents wanted me to play and to pick up an instrument, just to see if I was any good at it. They let me choose which one I wanted to play and I chose the trumpet. I identify as half American and half Rom. That's why our band is called Melez. It means half-blood.

Even if I didn't play music, I would still identify as Rom, but playing music is still a good way to keep in touch with my identity and culture. However, I think that the language is a big part of that too, that's why I have such a big desire to learn the language.



## ***Centuries of Migrations Kept in Music***

Benji continues talking about his father's organization *Voice of Roma* and their contributions to the preservation of cultural heritage. He shares the story of how his father always aimed to bring high profile Romani artists and Balkan musicians to the States to showcase their skills and their talents, and with that, the richness and beauty of Romani culture. Benji remembers his beginnings:

The first moment I knew I wanted to play trumpet was when I was maybe around 6 years old. My dad put on a festival with Roma musicians and when I first saw them playing trumpets, I knew right away that I wanted to play the trumpet. Two years later, they got me a trumpet, and from then on I just focused on the music. At first, they got me an American trumpet teacher, and I studied classical and jazz, but my heart wasn't really in it since I felt that it wasn't the style of trumpet I wanted to play.

Benji acknowledges the importance of music for Romani culture and how, generally speaking, the tradition is kept and preserved in the musical and dance manifestation. Being part of that practice has always been very important for Benji. He remembers how his father brought CDs with Roma music, and Benji tried to listen and play along with the recordings. Over the years, he mastered listening to music by ear and playing along, especially to the music played in the Balkans which is, according to Benji, how music in the Balkans is taught anyway.

Benji moved from California to Seattle, Washington to attend college where he became close to Christos Govetas, his family, and Drómeno band members. Christos became a second father figure to him and later Benji and Eleni Govetas co-founded the Melez Band and invited their friend Mik Bewsky and Eleni's brother Bobby to join. Benji very seriously approaches his work with the band. He talks about Romani heritage and the importance of continuous learning and keeping it alive.

Through the *Voice of Roma*, my father organized the tour for Džambo Aguševi, which included West Coast concerts, some East Coast concerts, and my band—Melez Band was lucky enough to open for him. We were also able to get a really close bond with Džambo—we played a lot of songs together. Džambo is an incredible trumpet player and I am very fortunate that he took me under his wing and he invited us, Eleni, Mik, and myself to study with him in his village in North Macedonia.



Benji shares that in order to be able to stay with Džambo and study Romani music, he might sacrifice his job. The company for which he works as a data analyst is not willing to keep his position for a long term, and Benji says that he understands. He speaks in a calm voice with a gentle smile. He says, no hard feelings, and he looks unaffected by the job loss. Benji understands his priorities and the idea that is bigger than a job, himself, or any other individual.

### ***Can You Speak Music?***

Benji and I continue talking about how music brings us closer to the nation and its culture. We chat about our favourite cultural activities. For him, it is music and for me, dance. Benji laughs and shares that he dances for fun occasionally, a couple of kolos. He prefers dancing Romani dances, and especially at Romani weddings and parties with relatives and close friends. He nods slowly and clarifies that it is not about the dance, but rather socializing and sharing the experience. He inhales deeply and describes that:

My passion for this kind of music is definitely cultural, and I don't know why I have such a proclivity for these types of melodies. Since I was young, they've always made an impact, and I would listen to jazz players and American trumpet players, but honestly it didn't do much for me. It doesn't come from the heart for me. It's also a way for me to stay in line with my culture and to identify as a Rom. It's also a sense of pride for me because we look around the world and we see these Balkan countries and a lot of the time, Romani musicians are the top guys, you know?

Benji leans forward and passionately explains that Roma do not have a nation, and never had a land or a country to call their own, and despite the fact that his father is from Kosovo, he does not feel connection with the land either. To make things even more complex, Benji's girlfriend is Serbian and her family is very patriotic when it comes to this topic because generally Serbian people recognize Kosovo as part of Serbia.

It's so sad how it's under Albanian control now. For my dad and my family who grew up there, it is actually the land that should be their home, but they don't really care whether it belongs to Serbia or Albania, because it's not about the government. And no matter what, the Roma are always going to be the most ignored subset of the culture, whether it's Serbians or Albanians in control. For sure, my family has always had an easier time communicating with Serbians, but my dad especially had a hard time growing up with Albanians because of racism.

Benji speaks slowly and carefully acknowledging my national connections to the land. He looks deep into my eyes and I suspect he examines the temperature coming from me





and if he can continue. I encourage him to share his sentiments as he experiences them. Maybe because I shared that I am halfblooded like him, belonging to Serbian and Montenegrin peoples, but I trust he is honest with me.

As far as that goes, I don't feel a national tie to Kosovo. But I am fully immersed in Roma culture, and especially through the music, and that's really where I feel the connection—not through the land.

Benji speaks softly and we both smile. His words are loaded with heavy emotions centuries old.

### ***Reclaiming a Place Through Culture***

Benji is relaxed in his chair and he is generous with his opinions and his thoughts. I ask him about places he feels he belongs. He immediately goes to his Roma half. He shares that he feels “at home” when he is around his Roma relatives.

I spent quite a bit of time in North Macedonia, since I have some family there, and that is where I would feel fully accepted. People would be confused by the colour of my skin, especially when they'd hear me speak Romanes. However, there are a lot of Roma all around the world who don't speak. Sometimes even their parents will raise them as if they're not actually Rom, like they'll say their Turkish or wouldn't speak Romanes in the house. Especially in Serbia, a lot of Roma there don't even speak Romanes anymore, and that is more of a safety kind of thing, like they want to integrate into the culture, and not necessarily be associated with Roma, because like I said, they're kind of seen as lower class or poor or whatever.

Benji's face looks very serious all of the sudden. He is visibly disturbed with what he talked about. Sadly, in my experience I know this to be true. Benji, pauses and then he smiles adding:

But then, we have our rich culture that always stays in us and that many of us practice in music and dance. Mostly music for me. I see in the Balkans, not just with Roma, but with Serbians, Montenegrins, and Croatians, that there's a rich culture we're tied to, and it's kind of a way that acting is much stronger and prominent.

Benji continues claiming his strong beliefs that norms, values, and believes, such as one's expected behavior, are all taught and transferred through cultural practices, such as going to church or attending a wedding for example. His voice lowers when he adds



that it is a matter of fact that since Roma do not have a land that belongs only to them, they have their music that they cultivate as a land.

### ***Growing Our Mahala***

I have never met Benji's father Sani, but from what I have heard about him, I see that Benji shares his passion for Roma culture and dedication to challenge the stereotypes. Educating people about Roma culture is very important for both Sani and Benji, and both of them have dedicated their lives to this cause. Sani has spent most of his adult life tirelessly working to present authentic Romani art, culture, and particularly music and dance, and with that, to educate the public. Benji has continued his father's legacy and is doing his part with the Melez Band.

We are mainly performing in front of American audiences, and whenever we're doing that, we want to expose Western audiences to this style of music and culture that they are very unaware of. For us musicians, one of our proudest moments is when we can get Americans to get up and start dancing to Balkan music or Roma music. It makes us very proud, and that is essentially our goal—to bring awareness.

Benji's face beams with contentment when he talks about his music and his contribution to the greater goal. Benji has been playing for years and performing with well-known musicians, but he humbly admits that he is only at the beginning and there is so much to learn and do.

Benji's observation of interconnectedness of Balkan culture, while still maintaining their diversity is inspirational. For example, he recognized that Roma music has many similarities with Arabic music.

Since we are Romani, we came from India and we passed through the Middle East, we passed through Turkey and we collected all these multi-century influences. There are a lot of Turkish elements in Greek music, there are a lot of elements of Turkish music in Balkans in general, the music scales that we play. And it is interesting to see how when we are there, in the Balkans, we can travel a few kilometers and the music will be so much different, but would still have some similar elements. So, when we listen to Albanians, we recognize our music.

Both Benji and I laugh at the truth of his words and shake our heads at the reality of Balkan history—there have been so many battles and wars in the Balkans, that is often difficult to remember who is in conflict with whom at the time. We agree that it would be



great to focus on the similarities in Balkan music for once, without specifying the exact place of origin for every song.

Over there, people are looking over the border at a neighbouring country or a region and the music and kolos look completely different to them. But for us, from here in North America, looking at the Balkans, we see it as the same music but with variations. There, people focus on differences.

Benji is a sensible old-soul and I feel content knowing that he and his Melez Band represent Balkan cultures that are so important to me. While they are only at the beginning of their journey, the group is humble and willing to learn at every step of their way. Benji shares these last words with me that symbolize the essence of Balkan music:

I'll never forget the advice that Christos gave me on how to play when soloing. We don't play the same music or the same style, but his words were so meaningful that it could be applied to any music: Let it come out of the heart, play from the heart. Once you have an idea of what you want to play and notes you want to use, try to add that sweet Turkish twist to it, and try to emulate sweetness, that emotion that is so prominent in Balkan music. Those words were very heavy for me.

Until we meet at the next igranka, Benji and I say our goodbyes, for now.

**Michael Ginsburg,  
Zlatne Uste Balkan Brass Band, New York, USA**

My time at the Balkanalia camp continues. It is the second last day, and it feels as if we have been here for weeks rather than for days. Maybe it is because we are tucked into the secluded woods far from any foot traffic, with only one road coming directly to the camp. It reminds me of life at the village, that I had experienced as a child while visiting my relatives around the Balkan lands—now independent countries of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia, that once existed under the same name—Yugoslavia. Those were simpler times; when we were focused only on the similarities, rather than the differences.

Last night at the igranka, I danced beside Michael. In kolo, his hand is strong and he takes the lead. He naturally leads. At one point, he was teaching us a new kolo. In his position as a teacher, he occasionally leaves kolo to trećak<sup>126</sup> so he can go around the

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<sup>126</sup> In Serbian for the second dancer in kolo, the most important after the leader.



room and observe everybody's steps. That is not the way to teach kolo and he knows it quite well, but that is the way this audience, his impatient students, require and unfortunately, there is no other way. We do not have days, weeks, months, years to learn and to perfect one dance. Because we want it now, and we want it all. After today, most of us will definitely not lead, and probably not even dance these kolos again. So why do we have this insatiable desire, this anxious yearning to *know* it all? I noticed Michael the very first evening. He does not dance in every kolo but when he does, he dominates the space. His *ćef* is so evident that it radiates its power to the other dancers.

The woman sitting beside me notices me watching Michael lead kolo. She also watches him with admiration. I ask if he was Greek—he dances Hasapiko perfectly. She smiles and shakes her head no. "*He is pure American,*" she says. "*No Balkan blood in him.*" I make a surprised face and she laughs. "*Yes, he dances perfectly, like he was born there,*" she nods her head. "*Without an accent,*" I add. She nods. Everyone always tries to dance beside him.

When I approached Michael, he already knew who I was. "*We are a small community,*" he explains. "*And your style [of dancing] is different from here.*" He agrees to share his experience with me, and we decided to meet in the afternoon, just before the final evening's *igranka*. Michael's schedule is full and I know I have limited time with him.

### ***An American in Balkans***

I ask Michael to tell his story: Who he is and how he arrived at this moment in time, that is, being interviewed as a knowledge holder at Balkanalia. He laughs, leans forward, and starts telling his story with a constant smile as if he is telling a joke. Michael was born and raised in New York and started dancing early, as a young teenager. He joined a Folk Dance House, established by American folkloric dance pioneers Michael and Mary Ann Herman.

Early on in my time there, maybe the second or third time Mary Ann taught a dance called *Trite Pati* and I struggled with it—I really didn't get it. When something is troubling me, I mull it over in my head and I try to get some clarity. So just before I went to sleep that night, I kept thinking about it, and I got out of bed and practiced and I thought oh my God, this is really simple! I thought: if she showed it to us like this, I would've got it right away. I went to bed realizing two things: I like



this dance that is challenging me, and I'm a teacher and I'm learning this as a teacher.

Michael shares that his involvement with the club, in a way, shaped his life. He started teaching folk dance just a few years later when he was only 16 years old, then later attended college and became a high school teacher. His connection with folk dance had never ceased, but just deepened over time. His approach to teaching folkloric dance is as methodical and thorough as his teaching at school, and often more:

Your journey as a teacher is never ending and you're never satisfied with how much your students are learning. I always think: What needs to happen? What do they need to do in order to be able to do what I want them to do? What experiences do they need in order to understand the concept I am teaching? I develop things, create blocks of knowledge, and since I teach adults, I try to build on their previous knowledge so they can comprehend the philosophy behind kolo I teach.

### ***This is My Church***

Michael continues telling his story with a smile, coolly. He sits comfortably, leaning back in his chair, and seems to be enjoying going down memory lane.

After dancing international dances for a while, I realized that all my favourite dances were Balkan dances—before I even knew where these dances came from. I like the precision and athletic nature in the steps and I like the rhythm. Balkan kolos chose me. I didn't choose Balkan dancing—it kind of grabbed me.

Michael identifies as a New Yorker. He considers himself American and culturally Jewish. While dancing kolo and playing Balkan music, he does not feel that he is connecting to his ethnic background, but he shares that he is connecting to this community.

A friend of mine is saying: I never went to church, but this is my church. This is where I go to get my social support, my social fix. There is a very strong community among Balkan dancers, and now there is a strong community among musicians who play Balkan music.

As he continues sharing his experience, Michael leans forward. His tone is even, the words smoothly flow out of his mouth. He seems quite confident but not arrogant or boastful. *Svoj na svome*, as we would say in Serbian, referring to a person who carries themselves acknowledging their own worth without distressing others. He knows who he is and discloses that folklore influenced and contributed toward his identity creation. In addition to folklore, Michael is an athlete, well accomplished in tennis.



I would always say that people didn't know me if they did not see me in these situations: playing tennis or dancing kolo. When I am out there playing sports, I fit in. But that is how I am with folklore as well. In fact, I treated dancing as another sport when I first started, but with added benefits of community.

In addition to his involvement with dancing folklore, Michael engaged in another level and started playing Balkan music. At first, he attended a Balkan camp where he enrolled in a Brass Band class. After only ten days, he had fully committed to it and upon returning to New York, he had organized a band of his own. After a while they were looking for an appropriate name and decided to pay homage to Guča, the world-famous Trumpet Festival. Based on the festival's first place prize Zlatna Truba (golden trumpet) they wanted to name it Zlatne Usne (golden lips), however somebody translated it wrong and they had accidentally named the band Zlatne Uste (golden mouths). By the time they grasped the error, it was too late.

When we went to Serbia, we had our name printed, and people would come up to us to tell us that we had made a mistake: "Greška, greška." I must have heard greška six thousand times, I'll never forget what it means. When we returned, the band members wanted to change the name, and I said no, that was our identity, we had zlatne uste identity and that is our formative word. We went to Serbia at least seven more times as a band competing at Guča twice, and always under the same name.

As Michael tells the story, we laugh hard. He tells the story in the most entertaining way and I enjoy listening about Balkan from his perspective. I share that I have read Minja Laušević's book. In a comical, but also in the most warm-hearted manner, Laušević described her first-time hearing about Michael's brass band. In the following excerpt she pointed out their "greška" to her friend Becky:

Zlatne Uste? I don't think it can be Zlatne Uste. That is grammatically incorrect. It must be Zlatne Usne," I explained, "or, maybe, Zlatna Usta." "No, I am pretty sure it is Zlatne Uste. I have their tape. I think they got it wrong, and after someone told them that it was not grammatically correct they decided to keep the name anyway since they had already printed the T-shirts and done the tape covers with that name. (Laušević, 2015, p. 3)

### ***Choosing Your Own Folklore***

Michael acknowledges and appreciates the culture of the Balkans, but he also shares the elements he did not enjoy. He reserves the right to an opinion, and he offers his view in a most non-judgemental way.



We continue talking about ethnicity, about folklore, what folklore is and means to him. Michael is very generous with his answers. He considers every question, every comment cautiously, contemplates before he offers his view. We talk about the pedagogical aspect of folkloric dance and why we dance. He sits quietly for a moment. He faintly smiles and I appreciate him taking time to respond. He begins slowly explaining how generally speaking, people who consider themselves only Americans do not have their own folklore. Michaels mentions songs that perhaps could be considered as old folk songs and Americans learned them as children growing up, such as “Red River Valley” and “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” However, he also shares that while these came from American history, he could hardly accept them as American folklore.

I did not experience those songs as my folklore. So, as a Jew coming from New York there was no tradition that felt like mine and in some ways that’s amazing because I have the world’s music to choose from. I was exposed to a lot of international dancing and music from all around the world, but I just gravitated to this. As I said, Balkan chose me.

### ***Folklore in Action***

I led the conversation back to the beginning when I observed him as a knowledge holder. He laughs and justifies:

People see me as very knowledgeable even if I am not from there and I don’t have any ethnic ancestral connection with the Balkans. That is because I only share what I know and there is a lot that I don’t know. I’ve been to the Balkans many times and I’ve seen folklore in action. How people relate to it, in what settings it occurs, what power it has in a community, where it comes from, and how dance affects people. I’ve seen it through the years and I’ve seen it change through the years. All that experience comes as a general knowledge of the Balkans.

Michael continues sharing how he advocates the importance of authenticity. He speaks about his conscious decision to not try to assimilate to the culture, but rather to maintain his distance. Out of respect, he never tries to be one of them when he travels to the Balkans. As such, people relate to him as a foreigner interested in their culture, in their ways of knowing and being in a world, rather than a person who is pretending to understand the knowledge they have been passing on generationally for centuries. Michael believes that because of his approach, he has maintained healthy relationships with the culture and individuals.



## ***Folklore as an Entry Point Into Traditional Knowledge***

Michael assumes his style of entertaining storyteller and continues sharing. He tells short anecdotes of his travels, always emphasizing how welcomed he felt, even with complete strangers. He shares how he is flabbergasted that every time he travels to the Balkans, he always experiences prominent levels of hospitality that he never encountered anywhere else. However, even more important is his discovery about the ability of local people to overcome the language barrier. Michael strongly believes that folklore music is able to expand the predictable communication channels:

At first there was a language barrier. But interestingly among different cultural groups, that barrier varied. For example, with Roma, the language is much less a barrier than with other Balkan cultures. I've noticed with other musicians, we needed to use more words to discuss tunes before we even start playing, as we would rely more on verbal rather than musical interaction. I prefer to spend more time playing with Roma than any other cultural group. There was that knowledge that we shared and often we fully understood each other. No words necessary. That's folklore.

## ***Acceptance of the Outside***

Michael continues talking about the significance of folklore dance. He clarifies that learning folklore is unique, and the practice itself employs different regions of the brain, such as the motor and somatosensory cortex, basal ganglia, and cerebellum. Further, folklore integrates many functions such as rational, musical, kinesthetic, and emotional, that are not used in everyday processes, and may be otherwise neglected. However, Michael's stories from his travels contribute the most to the treasury of knowledge about folklore.

Michael is well travelled and beside the Balkans, he has visited many other places around the world. As a final story, he talks about his first visit to Germany, a trip that he dreaded but felt it was important for him to undertake. All of a sudden, he speaks in a low voice. His tone instantly loses the entertaining quality that he maintained during the whole interview. He begins with a sentence that at first, I do not understand. He says that "the experience of doing dances that bring you joy that are not from your country, there are from other countries, it sets up an acceptance of the outside." I ask him to clarify. Michaels looks at me and pauses. I see that this story is especially important for him. He nods and continues.





When I went to Germany for the first time, I did not know what to expect—I was dreading travelling to the country inhabited with people who killed my people, and eight million of them. When I went, this was around 40 years, almost 50 years after the war, and I didn't know what to expect. And what I discovered is that I love the Germans. There are really wonderful, open, friendly people. I realize I am not dealing with all Germans; I am dealing with Germans that love folklore, and with that they are not the one that hate. They are a separate group of people that really like what's going on in outside of the German culture, and that is what makes a difference. They are not Germanic centric, they are not closed, they are open. Folklore opens you.

Michael smiles broadly. He looks like he just won a tennis match. Or the grand prize at the Guča festival. His enthusiasm is contagious, so I start to feel content and proud. Also privileged to be part of this community that opens us to love, to accept, to fully immerse into the wholeness of our beings. Michael shares his last words of wisdom.

It comes down to the appreciation of an art, of a soul, of other people, of what comes out, of their life, and sets up a curiosity. Hey, what is that life like? Maybe I want to go to the Balkans? I would have never wanted to go to Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, if I wasn't interested in their music, in their lives. What is that life like they are living? We, who dance and play music of other cultures, and with that accept those cultures, their people's souls and lives—we are open to anything.

We hear Drómeno is starting to play and igranka has begun. We get up and walk towards the others to join kolo.

### **Mihajlo Hajduk, Gradina Dance Club, Vancouver, Canada**

I have met and danced with Mihajlo long before I started dancing with Gradina. Many years ago, I attended Balkan Night Northwest event organized by the Govetas family and the rest of the Northwest Balkan group. I remember Mihajlo wore a t-shirt depicting an idyllic village with the name printed above the picture in large font: Ruski Krstur. In between two kolos, still out of breath, I asked him about the picture on his shirt. He looked at me almost surprised and answered in a matter-of-fact voice: "Centre of the world. Ruthenian, that is!" Having fun with my puzzled expression, he smiled and turned around to join another kolo.

Many years later Mihajlo and I are sitting on the grass in the park across from the St. Sava Serbian Orthodox Church in Vancouver where we, the Gradina dancers, dance



every week. During our dance practices I have talked about my research many times and from the start, Mihajlo offered to share his experience. The abundance of Mihajlo's cognitive and somatic knowledge as well as his enthusiasm for folkloric and cultural practices is impressive and inspiring. His demeanor is composed and quiet. His healthy sense of humour and gentle way of living gives his words a nostalgic tone.

### ***A Culture Between West and East Slavic***

Mihajlo's background is Rusyn, which could belong to either West and East Slavic groups. He considers himself a part of the Western Slavic group. Mihajlo grew up in the village with the ethnic dominance of 90% of Rusyn people within the multicultural Vojvodina, North Serbia. He went to both elementary and high school in Ruthenian, danced in dance ensembles, belonged to the theatre, recited and competed in poetry, worked at the TV station as a reporter and a host—overall fully immersed in the Rusyn culture. I inquire about his level of involvement and as an answer Mihajlo shares his family story.

I was born in Germany. My parents went to Germany to work there, they were Gastarbeiters. At the time, my seven-year older sister was playing on the balcony with her dolls and she was talking to her dolls in German. When my father heard her speak German to her dolls, he realized that was something different, strange to what he was used to or to something he was familiar with, so at that moment, he decided that he wanted to go back to the homeland. When we returned to Ruski Krstur, my sister had a hard time adjusting because she has spent all her life living in the huge city and then she went back to the small village, to the school with totally different instructional language. At home, we spoke Rusyn, and outside of home, German. All of the sudden, she found herself in a classroom where Serbian was and still is the official language of Vojvodina.

Mihajlo proudly adds that while his sister went to a bigger city for the university, she returned to Ruski Krstur and still lives there with her family.

### ***A Wealth of Diversity: Črvena Ruža***

When Mihajlo speaks about his life in Ruski Krstur, his face takes on some a nostalgic glow, a reflection that radiates deep love. He talks about his beginning to dance in a children group at the Dom Kulture (similar to the Community Centre), and how even though all children were exposed to the same teachings, he persisted, while many gave up.



The level of all those cultural activities was quite high. For years, the amateur theatre from Ruski Krstur was one of the main forces of amateurism of former Yugoslavia. As a folkloric dance group, we regularly competed on a federal level. In the second part of my high school I was part of the performing ensemble and as such we toured and performed around Europe and represented Yugoslavia. We were one of the best performing groups.

Mihajlo also remembers an annual festival called Črvena Ruža<sup>127</sup>. At the time, the festival was two weeks long. This was a time when the whole community came together and celebrated traditional music and dances. In addition to their own dance and music ensembles, the festival attracted many amateur and professional performing groups. The majority of Vojvodina attended. Mihajlo shares his memories:

The entire village was so excited, so everyone would cut their grass, paint their fruit trees in front of their houses, and paint their houses. It was so exciting because people from all over the place would come to the festival. We lived for it from year to year. It was amazing.

The festival still exists nowadays, but is tragically reduced. From the glorious days of the 60s, 70s, and even 80s, it lost its glory in the 90s because of the war and the changes in the region. At that time, it was reduced to a few days at first, and while devoted organizers tried to restore it, it never went back to its original reputation.

### ***Dancing as Part of Everyday Life***

Mihajlo speaks about his childhood and involvement with dance. He speaks in his quiet tone and often shrugs his shoulders indicating he was not thinking about these things when he was little—they were just part of everyday life.

I was never thinking of it as something that I have to do. My first memories are from weddings. We would go to a wedding and dance. Rusyn weddings used to be really cheerful and everyone would dance and everyone would sing. I remember listening to the bands playing their repertoire and everyone would sing every single song. And that is how I learned traditional Rusyn songs at an early age. And the dances too. It was something!

Being part of the folkloric dance group came as a natural next step. For the tightly knitted community of the village, folklore dancing was profoundly important. Mihajlo remembers

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<sup>127</sup> In Ruthenian for The Red Rose.



that all his peers danced in the same group, with his sister, and his friends. Only a few chose not to, but they got involved in other cultural activities, such as singing.

Becoming part of the dance ensemble was just a normal thing. Dance was not a planned activity. Even now I don't see it as an activity. It is a sort of meditation because it is uplifting and energising, and at the same time is calming. It is who I am, my way of life. I've been dancing all my life, and is something that I will be doing for the rest of my life. Dance is just part of me.

We speak about our children and how they do not have the same access to these cultural practices. Mihajlo shakes his head and discloses that unfortunately, this is the reality of the world now everywhere and not only here in diaspora. He tells the story:

When I went back to my village three years ago to attend my nephew's wedding, it was totally different than what I expected. It was totally generic, like you could not tell if it was happening here, or in Germany, or in Ruski Krstur. Nothing was unique or tied to the tradition in which I was brought up. Very mainstream westernised. We live in different times now and the world is completely changing in one direction.

Mihajlo and I share the sentiment about the way the world changes, and we are both deeply concerned with how we will be able to transfer the cultural knowledge to our children in a natural and nurturing way.

### ***Sociocultural Theory of Transfer of Knowledge***

We talk about Nevestinsko Oro (Bridal dance) and how in a somatic way everything a woman needs to know about how to prepare for a wedding and a marriage, regardless of the culture, she can learn from that dance. Performed by a bride and seven other women, with a use of syncopation in steps, this kolo depicts preparing a bride for a big event. Through kolo the bride learns about struggle, endurance, balance, patience, support, love, responsibility, disappointment, sorrow, resilience, joy, and all that before she even meets the groom. The women in her community—her mother, aunt, sister, best friend, neighbour teach her and they are the ones who hold her while she learns, both physically and metaphorically.

Mihajlo nods and agrees. He questions our current position and the methodology that we might implement as well.

How can you teach that to the new generation? It is part of the collective experience and that cannot just be taught. I believe the basis of folklore



teachings is in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of transfer of knowledge. The theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in the development of a child. Vygotsky believed that community is essential in the process of "making meaning."

Mihajlo continues explaining his position on how learning should happen in an inclusive rather than segregated environment and out of context. For example, if we group eight-year-old children with a teacher who teaches them how to dance, would be completely different from grouping eight-year-old children with parents, siblings, grandparents, and the rest of the community who know how to engage in cultural activities and who could share their knowledge in a natural and nurturing manner.

People used to dance certain dances in certain situations—there were dances for celebrating harvest, coming of age, certain holidays, rituals, and while the adults were dancing—the children were observing. The next year they would observe again, until a few years later, they would be ready to join the dancing. The children would absorb the knowledge naturally, instead of receiving directives on how to do the steps mechanically.

Mihajlo and I discuss how there are different ways of receiving as well as passing knowledge. And handling that knowledge and how it fits within you. How do we process what we learned? How do we make meaning? How do we adjust to this new knowledge? Mihajlo clarifies that,

because when you learn for an exam, you would learn facts and then forget quite a bit of it after the exam passes, but when you learn how to dance at a certain age, you dance your whole life. It stays with you; it becomes part of you. They say: learning without pressure, but that's not even learning, it's becoming. It's part of the social experience, it's part of your family life, community participation. It's not learning. It's just being. You don't go there to learn how to dance, you just do it.

Mihajlo recognizes a similar approach to learning, and praises our teacher's Nada style and our practice at Gradina. We laugh and agree that we appreciate why Nada does not let us repeat dances even if we do not know them and we want to continue learning. We can learn without intention and without stress. Instead of directly learning twenty dances at night, [sometimes we dance up to thirty different kolos] we just dance and enjoy—even if we know the steps, even better! Eventually we will know more and there will always be some that we do not. But more importantly, the next time the music starts, we just start to dance without thinking about the steps. Through the constant exposure to



the sensory stimulus, we develop muscle memory so that our body (heart, and spirit) leads, and the mind follows.

So many times, I wouldn't even know the steps to a dance. If someone asks me how this step goes, I would not be able to explain—I hear the music and the body moves. And it's not even the body, ćef comes and I start dancing. I don't even know how. It just happens. Especially for kolos close to my heart and spirit.

Mihajlo continues sharing his experience on how he discovered his passion for Macedonian dances and he profoundly enjoys dancing those kolos. In addition to the way he was brought up immersed in cultural activities, Mihajlo pays tribute to his old teacher's approach to his deep appreciation of folkloric dances.

### ***Everything Has its Purpose in Traditional Dancing***

When I asked Mihajlo to tell me more about his teacher, his face immediately softened and with a smile on his face he begins his story about ćika<sup>128</sup> Banjac.

I was lucky to meet ćika Banjac who was one of the last choreographers from the time when after WWII, the government of Yugoslavia organized experts from the region to maintain some of our folkloric heritage. They wanted them to go to the villages and learn traditions of different people and bring that knowledge together and preserve it. Ćika Banjac was one of the last experts still doing that important work at the time when I met him. We somehow connected on a very deep level. We remained very close until he passed away.

Ćika Banjac was from Vranje, Southern Serbia, and his wife was a Bunjevka from Vojvodina, Northern Serbia. Being intimately exposed to and immersed in both cultures, ćika Banjac developed a deep understanding of the movements, rituals, temperaments, habits, and other dispositions of the people with whom he lived. Naturally, he was considered an expert in dances that originated in those regions. In particular, dances from these two opposing parts of Serbia are known to be difficult to teach because they are unusual, unique, complicated, beautiful, and wonderfully nuanced. One of the main ideas that ćika Banjac held for his apprentices like Mihajlo, and passed through his teachings, is that everything has its purpose in traditional dancing.

In Bunjevci, the girls wear just slippers on their feet, in which is really difficult to dance in, and that is for a reason. The girls' outfits are lavish,

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<sup>128</sup> In Serbian for Uncle.



made out of pure silk and brocade<sup>129</sup>, insanely expensive hand embroidery, stitching and such. The girls need to wear the expensive outfits so they would have a better chance to marry someone from a good family. To be able to afford such luxurious outfits for his daughter (one at the time), the father would have to sell a salaš<sup>130</sup> or two. For that reason, a daughter would take extra care of her outfit—she would not make even the smallest of unnecessary movements, let alone dance vigorously, or God forbid sweat—she would not do anything that could potentially ruin her outfit. Čika Banjac would explain: Banjevke ne igraju—one se nose<sup>131</sup>.

Mihajlo and I continue discussing the importance of the story that accompanies dances, the holistic way of teaching folklore dancing and cultural practice. Among other elements that we can learn from kolo, such as how to position, how to behave, mimic temperament of the people whose kolos we dance, we also learn how to develop compassion toward other people. We begin to think about these women and men not as Croats or Serbs or Rusyns, rather as fathers who need to assure their daughters will marry in good families so they will live easier lives. Mihajlo continues remembering čika Banjac's stories.

He taught us dances from his region where he grew up, from Niška Banja. Roma people, Roma women when they dance Čoček, they would typically entertain the wealthy white man with their dances. In return, they hoped to receive compensation in forms of money, food, or something as a pay for their hard work. In order for them to be paid well, the laird would have to be satisfied with the show. The women would do everything in their power to entertain—they would be very provocative and persuasive and give it their all trying to impress the laird because most likely their life or lives of their family and children was at stake. That is why these dances are so passionate—often, it was a matter of life or misery and squalor.

We talk about Nemo kolo<sup>132</sup> from Glamoč. It is one of the oldest Serbian dances. It is performed without music as it was 700 years ago when it was performed as a secret activity to preserve Serbian culture under oppression from the invading Ottoman armies. People danced without the music so they would not attract attention to themselves. The percussive sound of foot stomping is enhanced with the jingle of the necklace coins that

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<sup>129</sup> Richly decorative shuttle-woven fabrics.

<sup>130</sup> In Serbian for a farm.

<sup>131</sup> In Serbian for “*Banjevke women don't dance—they present themselves by appearing to float above the ground.*” [my translation].

<sup>132</sup> No music dance.



decorate the female dancers' necks and bodies. The kolovodja<sup>133</sup> calls out commands, and the dancers answer with the movement that was called out. As with most Serbian kolos, this is also a courting kolo. It is really hard to dance without the support of music, especially young girls who needed to dance to show off and prove to their potential mothers-in-law that they have the endurance and strength and they are capable of the hard, physical work that awaits them in life.

That is similar to Montenegrin Oro, where the music that accompanies the dances is really simple. There is no harmony and no musicians. There is no support to cover anything that is not perfect, you are on your own with your body to impress suitors or future mothers-in-law. Mihajlo, knowing that I am from Montenegro, teases me about dancing to impress my future husband.

Mihajlo loves Macedonian kolos. He recently discovered his passion for Macedonian music and rhythm and he loves talking about them.

Macedonian dances evoke very specific sensibilities. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Macedonia was very poor and people often left their homes to go to pečalba<sup>134</sup>. They were known as pečalbari. They would leave on the boat and sail for months, often never knowing whether they would ever return to their homes or not; whether they would see their families ever again. For the send-off celebrations, they would start the dances with really heavy hearts, heavy feet, very mournful, miserable, sorrowful. However, since Macedonians are generally very happy people, they would allow the rhythm to pick up and eventually they would forget their sad occasion and dance their hearts out. Who knows when, if ever, they would have the opportunity to dance again, so they would dance and dance? Maybe that is why they are so passionate!

### ***Meditative Quality of Dance***

Mihajlo and I agree about the recognized sentiments of kolo. We start talking about deep emotions while dancing—the meditative quality of dance and its profound meaning. We also agree that every dance can be meditative, but this traditional type of dance is particularly important because it connects us to the origins of the culture. It carries the profound values of its archetypal elements. Each of us, when we dance, we

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<sup>133</sup> In Serbian for a leader of kolo.

<sup>134</sup> In Serbian for a hired work outside the permanent place of residence, usually temporary, seasonal; pečal—trouble, sorrow, misery, torment.





put meaning into it by how we learned it, how we carry it in us, and how we experience it through life. If we learned it within the community that is important to us, it has a different meaning and that is how we will pass that meaning to others! That is what makes it spiritual.

We talk about *ćef*. Mihajlo describes his experience.

It's that meditative state of being that cannot be achieved by simply wanting, or talking about it, it just happens. You cannot achieve it by dancing if the situation is not just right, if the music is not just right, if the company is not right. It happens when all the elements combine, it just happens. For example, I cannot dance to the music that irritates me that is not traditional, but is electronic, fancy. It could be with the same rhythm but it doesn't touch [affects] me.

Mihajlo continues talking about *ćef*. He describes it as an interesting phenomenon, very organic, authentic, and primordial.

It's very difficult to explain it fully—as it just happens without any way to expect it or influence it. When the moment is right, it just happens. But it doesn't happen to everybody. It doesn't happen to all dancers, because it is an individualistic experience. Not everyone has it in them—people are wired differently. People who experience cultural practices and specifically music and dance in a similar way, can expect to achieve *ćef* in a similar constellation of events. However, people who process the events differently, even if they are in the same situation, some will get there and some will not.

We agree that talking about the meditative quality of dance is not easy, because it is so complex and abstract. The soundwaves of the music we listen while dancing penetrate us in a way that we resonate to it. Mihajlo clarifies,

for me, it is important to be surrounded by people who appreciate kolo in its glory and completeness. During COVID, some chose to dance while practicing social distancing, staying apart, dancing for themselves. I ask, what's the point? That is not dancing for me—I could not do it. I have to hold someone's hand in order to connect or share the energy. Folkloric dance is a collective thing. It is a collective experience. It is not something that you do by yourself in the proximity of another person. And definitely it is not a cardio exercise as some people see it nowadays.

We continue discussing how dancing in kolo is a collective occurrence, and it is the way to connect with people.

It is very meaningful. In a very intimate setting, we share the experience. We hold hands dancing in kolo, in a society in which that is



not always encouraged. But it is where we come from—that’s what we know—to hold each other. In kolo we touch, we hold other human beings and we connect on that level too.

Mihajlo and I sit quietly for a moment. His words are heavy and they are sitting on our shoulders, pressing us down. We know that kolo connects us spiritually, but that spirit is not always happy and joyful. Sometimes it feels as if our Ancestors want more from us than we can do.

Kolo is part of our being, of our individual and collective experience being a member of our family, community, society. It becomes part of us and for many of us our identities, our way to go through life. It expresses us in many ways. The experience of dance in kolo is unique to each of us and that is what heightens its spiritualistic quality. As well as contemplative experience, uplifting and soothing at the same time. Kolo positions us on a higher level of feeling, thinking, and functioning holistically. Mihajlo and I finish the conversation. We are ready for kolo.

**Alexander Marković,  
Department of Anthropology, Chicago, USA**

Nada is teaching us Čupurlika kolo. She is teaching us the steps, asking us to listen to the music and the rhythm attentively. She tells us to listen until we know when to lift our legs, how much, and in what direction. She talks about the man who taught her this kolo. She talks about Alex and his time spent in Vranje<sup>135</sup>. She re-tells the story he told when he was teaching it. I listen carefully. I know that I need to listen until I know why I dance. Then I will know how to.

Alex and I are social media friends. We have never met in person, but we belong to the same folkloric social circles. Also, positioned not only as a scholar, but as a person from the same ethnic background, I was impressed by Alex’s article “Exploring the Politics of Performance among Roma Brass Musicians in Vranje, Serbia,” and concurred with his arguments on stigmatized practices in the local society. For many years, Alex also served as the President of Eastern European Folklife Center (EEFC), a non-profit organization founded in 1982 that gathers hundreds of North Americans

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<sup>135</sup> City in South Serbia region.



interested in East European cultures. I connected with Alex and he was happy to offer his knowledge to my research. We meet on Zoom<sup>136</sup>.

### ***Brass Band Anthropologist***

I am writing this dissertation in the year 2020 when, due to the global pandemic, technology became an utterly integral part of everyday life. Alex looks large on my screen. We sit much closer than we would if we were meeting face-to-face. Months of social interaction on Zoom desensitized us to this new “normal.” As a fully assimilated digital immigrant, I appreciate the use of technology to extend the human potential. But only up to a point. I am not against the use of technology; however, I am against the demise of relation. I am afraid of our obsession and enthusiasm with technology. And I am afraid of the loss of humanity, sensitivity, and consideration. Now, I am afraid of how “normal” it feels to be talking to Alex via Zoom.

As with all of my collocutors, I ask Alex to tell me about himself, his involvement with folkloric studies, to share what he deems important. He begins telling me about his ethnic background, identifying as Serbian American, born in Chicago. On his mother’s side, Alex’s family are Serbian Kozarci from Northern Bosnia. His grandparents, refugees after WWII, met in Germany, and then immigrated to the USA. His mother was born in Chicago. On the other side, Alex’s father was born and raised in a village near the city of Leskovac, in southern Serbia and immigrated to the USA in his late 20s. He first went to Cleveland where his father, Alex’s grandfather, has been during WWII. He was a prisoner of war, but from the Bulgarian side of the occupation of Serbia, who ended up in the USA as a pečalbar, a bricklayer in Cleveland. He never went back to Serbia, but he stayed connected to his family by sending money to his two children and wife who was still taking care of his parents.

My dad came to Cleveland and eventually met my mom in Chicago and they got married. So, I never know if I am first, second, or third generation, I didn’t immigrate, but I have a parent who really was formed in former Yugoslavia, Serbia and I have a parent who really is quite American but had connections to the heritage through local community, the church, and local activities. Especially in Chicago, where there is enormous Serbian community.

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<sup>136</sup> Video and audio conferencing platform popular in 2020.



For both of Alex's parents, it was important to cultivate a very strong sense of their children's identity of Serbian heritage, but they had very different approaches to it. His mother's understanding of Serbian culture was based on the American-Serbian context and on her personal religious views. For his father, it was important to develop Serbian cultural identity, and he was keener on language classes, folk dance, and communal engagement, such as becoming friends with other Serbian children from the community.

When my sister turned five, she became of age to go to the dance group, so my parents said, "You don't have an option anymore—if she's going to go, you will go too!" But amazingly, by the second week's practice I realized it fit me very well. I got it, I got the idea of trying to move the body to music in certain ways, I could learn patterns quickly, and I realized that I enjoyed it very much. I was motivated by learning for tradition, heritage, and cultural reasons. I felt nostalgia that I should not be feeling. It felt right to me. It felt old, something that I could connect with on a deeper level, even if it was something that I could not logically understand.

Alex was ten years old when he visited Serbia for the first time. He had spent some time in the village and some in the cities and that created the clarity he needed for his further development.

It strengthened that sense of "where I am from" for me. Then afterwards, when I danced in kolo, I could almost see my aunt and the village life in my mind. I connected the sounds of the music with this construction of life. The music and the movement being connected in my brain in that larger sense of participating in something that was beyond me, that was older than me, that was continuing through those of us who are performing it, even if we weren't over there in Serbia, or much more rooted in something more traditional than the dance.

However, it was Alex's American family, particularly his mom's sister, that exposed him to the studies by taking him to museums. By the time he went to high school, Alex knew he wanted to pursue anthropology studies, which eventually connected two of his passions: the heritage through music and dance from his own background, coupled with the growing sense of academic interest.

### ***Trying Out Different Kolos***

A few years later, Alex's childhood friend from a Greek community shared that their dance group was short on young men and that they needed men to dance with them. She presented the idea that based on some Serbian kolos, it would be easy for Alex to learn.



I'd never considered dancing what I saw as other people's traditions before, but I think that broader kind of anthropological interest of mine was enough to say "well why not?" When I was fifteen, I actually started with a Greek dance group as well, alongside the Serbian.

Alex smiles, sharing that this decision broadened his perspectives on folkloric dance and identity. Particularly interesting was his father's reaction. Alex remembers:

It felt almost like my father was afraid that somehow, I would enjoy [Greek dancing] so much that I would walk away from the Serbian things and only do these other things. I struggled as a teenager to try to explain to people, especially people in these ethnic communities, why I would be okay with exploring other people's traditions.

While Alex's father was worried, his mom was much more open to it. Alex now ponders if his mother's American upbringing and her life among diverse communities was the reason for her tolerance. But even more interesting was the Greek community's reaction. While the people who brought him into the dance group were happy to have him there, there were people in their wider community who were outraged when they learned that he was not born Greek. Alex clarifies,

It was an interesting moment for me because first I had to make sense for myself about how could you really try to enter deeply into somebody else's (if you want to label it that way) cultural tradition and still feel like you can be true to it and representative of what they believe is important there, but not feel like your own sense of identity is compromised just because you crossed a border here or a boundary in some way.

To further complicate things, Alex shares that for some reason at the Serbian church in Chicago, children would dance until they turn 18, and then they would stop since that was the oldest level of instruction. Since that was the only possible solution for him at the time, he spent time teaching Serbian dance groups, so he quickly went from being a performer to being someone who passed the knowledge to the next generation, even if many of his students were not that much younger than he was at the time.

As he was progressing with his academic career, Alex decided to pursue a graduate project combining his love of music, dance and performing with his anthropological interests.

I think that my Ph.D. project was also influenced by my experiences in some way growing up as a diaspora kid. What does it mean to say that you're Serbian when you live in an environment where most people around you are not necessarily Serbs? Your choice is to follow certain



practices to keep the language, for example. Many things we do are really choices that we make in a specific way that people in Serbia may not feel as conscious or conscientious because you're just immersed in the full culture.

Alex and I discuss that Serbian people living in Serbia might experience Serbian culture differently. They might feel that traditional cultural practice is so generic, or old-fashioned, or it does not connect with their curiosities and interests.

### ***Who Controls Why and What We Dance?***

While Alex's project was on ethnicity, ethnic identity, and the connection of experiencing it through music and dance, he specifically focused on cultural identity and lived identity, such as: what is it about performing culture and performance art that impacts people to experience, live, and continue creating that particular sense of identity they have for themselves? Alex shares his father's story that inspired his interest in the topic.

My grandfather never really came back to the village after being taken as a prisoner of war in WWII. From Germany he then went to the U.S., to Cleveland to work, and he would send money back home to his family. It was good money, and the village was jealous of my father's family. People gossiped about them and called my father an unfortunate orphan. Naturally he was hurt and when he was about 15 years old decided to show the whole village that he was in control. He took the money from my grandmother without her knowing and went up to the churchyard where the people gathered to celebrate the village savor (church patron saint celebration). A Roma brass band was there to play for the event. My father managed to get their attention, and gave them a really big tip to play a few dance tunes for him while he led those kolos. He kept giving them good amounts of cash, and kept asking for his favourite songs and kolos. The band was playing only for him, since he was giving so much money, and all of the rest of the villagers couldn't do anything about it! His idea was to show them, to stop the evil mouths about his family's broken status.

For Alex, this powerful story marks the beginning of his life's dedication to Balkan and specifically Roma performing culture and traditions. For me, the importance lies in the fact that one person can be permitted to control the mood and spirit level of the whole village. With the use of the band and their performing practice, any community member, even practically an outcast, can have the moment when they can dominate, and with that, manipulate well established power dynamics. Even for a brief moment, their voices can be heard.



Alex continues sharing his rich and diverse experience and his story of connecting with dance and performance culture as a way of heritage and identity. We discuss the specifics of his personal life and lived experiences within different Balkan communities in Chicago and agree that he probably could not have encountered them if he had been born in Serbia. Also, his academic interest that grew from his teenage years came together with this ethnic heritage. Alex's critical scholarly way of looking at these broader dynamics and his exposure to Greek folk dance has sensitized him to an aspect of the way Serbian folk dances carried on, not only in diaspora, but even in Serbia nowadays.

I was shocked when I started with the Greek folk groups and when I learned they weren't doing choreographies when they danced. With many Greek folk dance practices in Greece and in the diaspora is the notion that you learn "real" village dances—unaltered and the kind of social communal dances in their basic form and to their basic original music. There was no sense of altering for stage presentation.

This is a whole different concept for me because I had always learned Serbian kolos from the knowledge carriers that came from Belgrade<sup>137</sup> and often danced at Kolo<sup>138</sup>. They would teach us the Vlah choreography but they didn't know the names of different pieces of music, the names of different dances whose steps had been used as part of the choreography, and they would just tell us, "this is prvi korak, drugi korak, treci korak"<sup>139</sup>.

Alex's exposure to the Greek style of dancing opened the door to explore traditions of folkloric dancing. Alex started searching for knowledge holders of "real" kolos, but it was difficult to find people who were enthusiastic dancers from their own homeland regions and who would be able to talk about kolo names, tunes, and steps.

With my long exposure to Greek culture, I want something that feels a little more authentic and a little more original for our Serbian kolos too. I'm not interested in running circles around on a stage or very flashy moves or something like that and I couldn't find a community, here anyway, that I could connect with them and they would be interested in something like that.

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<sup>137</sup> Capital of Serbia.

<sup>138</sup> National Ensemble of Folk Dances and Songs of Serbia "Kolo".

<sup>139</sup> In Serbian for "The first step, the second step, the third step." [my translation].



When he travelled to Serbia for his graduate work, he did his best to attend the ceremonies and rituals, learn, and record original dances. With this gained knowledge, Alex is attempting to pass this knowledge in the most respectful way.

I do the best of my abilities to have researched this over the many years. Nowadays, when I teach Serbian folk dance for usually American circles at the Balkan dance festivals, I like to present dances with the background and within the context on who these people are, where they live, what the basic social dances are that they do, with the music that they're usually connected to. But also, how that's actually embedded into their everyday lives.

We talk about Nada and Gradina and we agree that when we dance and learn new dances, we are interested in knowing the background stories as they enrich experience and understanding.

These kolos and the stories are connected to real people and real situations and traditions and I feel people should know about them as a larger package in order to understand how they work and what their value is in the world.

### ***Diversity Within the Same Group***

Alex shares how he always preferred being offered a variety of kolos, otherwise he would feel too confined and stale. Even as a child, he would prefer to be able to cycle through many different things and he would always find himself circling back to the original. For that reason, Alex's interest in Greek culture was different enough to keep him engaged, but similar enough to keep him focused.

There was this curiosity for me of figuring out how another group's cultural brain ticks. Asking "what are their experiences," not in a logical rational way, but in a sense of trying to understand the organic groove that a whole group of people created over generations. To hear them say "there's some music that we have" and "these are the kinds of movements or bodily expressions that we think match this music the best" or "these are the most enjoyable moves for this music." There was a pleasure of finding out people's specific aesthetic of movement to sound. Obviously, I couldn't say these things to myself when I was 15-year-old, but even then I had this unexplained curiosity.

### ***Building Multi Generational Identity Through Kolo***

Alex continues sharing about his extended visit to Serbia and how he was learning about Serbian Romani culture aesthetics of dance, specifically how the movements are connected to a variety of other issues such as gender, age, social status





and more. His experiences with cross-cultural dance education that he received in a haphazard way through his teenage years laid a platform for him to be able to study this very different cultural community in Serbia. Alex was quickly immersed in the analytics of why people move in certain ways and what it is about these moves that they really appreciate. He talks about a Roma woman, a mother of his close friend, who when she learned that Alex was engaged, recommended they wed in Vranje rather than in the USA.

Aleks, nemoj tamo u Americi da se ženiš. Znaš da je ovde bolje, imaš lepšu muziku, imaš bolje običaje. Dodji si u Vranje, ovdena da se ženiš. Al', ne k'o vi Srbi ovde u Vranje da se ženiš, nego k'o mi Romi. Naša muzika, naši običaji. Ne da djipaš tamo k'o Srbi bac, bac, bac, trka `vamo, trka tamo, skaču okolo i sve. Nego lepo da se ženiš, sa ove naše lepe, lagane pesme i kola<sup>140</sup>.

Alex and I share a laugh. He speaks in south Serbian dialect, impersonating his friend's mom in the most adoring manner. He continues explaining her sentiment.

With her words, she had a sense that there is an aesthetic superiority of Roma cultural traditions actualized in subtlety of movements, in the groundedness of slow music, in complex rhythmic patterns, in finding the space in that rhythmic sequence, and in the in-between pieces of notes of music.

We discuss the importance of understanding the affective, the emotional, not always verbal, not always conscious dimension of this performance practice. When this affective action combines with the rational, the thinking, the memory that we have of seeing others do it, of performing it ourselves, that manufactures an organic sense of identity. This communal identity construction is at the same time an individual experience as well, since only through our own skin can we experience that phenomenon.

We only do it that way because others before us have developed a similar aesthetic to do it. There's also the sense that you embrace all of the others as an organic whole. For example, I am not just me, the bride, but I'm the same as every other bride who came before me as the others that I've seen in my generation who got married. And I think I want the next generation of brides to be like I was as well through

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<sup>140</sup> In Serbian for "Alex, don't get married in America. You know it's better here; you have better music; you have better customs. Come to Vranje: here to get married. But, not to get married like you Serbs in Vranje, but like us Roma! Our music—our customs. Not to jump and leap like Serbs here, hop, hop, hop, sprint here, sprint there, bouncing around and everything. To get married gracefully, with our beautiful, easy songs and kolos." [my translation].



doing some of the same movements, the same rituals, the same practices.

Alex elucidates that his graduate project informed the way he thinks about the performing arts, especially dance, in the way that connects the body, mind, and identity—something difficult to verbalize, but exceptionally powerful connection that we make as human beings.

### ***Ćef and Merak***

It is getting late, and Chicago is three hours ahead. I am cognizant of the time difference and the fact that Alex's toddler daughter might need her dad for a good night story. The last topic that we discuss is the phenomenon of *ćef*. Interestingly, an online newsletter published by the East European Folklife Center (EEFC) is called Kef Times. On their website, they explain that "Kef is a word used in various forms throughout the Balkans to convey a spirit of pleasure and enjoyment, such as one experiences when partaking of good food, music, dancing and friendship" (EEFC, 2020). Also, I have read Alex's dissertation, (Marković, 2017) and I agree with how he explains *ćef*. But during this conversation, he opens up even further.

There's a way in which people's memories and learned associations of what constitutes good music and dance, or a good sensorial experience, such as good food, good drink, good social circumstances, come together well to create the right moments of *ćef*. All these elements are connected with the bodily and emotional engagement and expressions.

Affect is important because it's a bridge between the body and the mind, the things that are not always conscious or in the forefront of people's minds but which can be experienced or really pushed into the conscious through the organic bodily experience of actions.

Alex and I discuss that *ćef* is not just the outburst of natural feelings. Rather, there are very specific regional ways of expressing *ćef* that are unique to this particular place. Also, people have been enculturated to behave in ways that they have seen their elders do. Thus, it is a marriage of cultural learning, cognitive aspect, visceral experience, and genetic predisposition. It is demonstrated in the way that the body is expected to express and feel it, since it is rooted in the body and externally only exists in the bodily expressions. It is very natural, so people signify its presence. It does not appear to be rational, nor can be artificial or performative. It seems inherited, real, true, and deep, and it comes from the stomach and from the heart. Even if *ćef* is performed, it is done in a



way that people who are performing deliberately put themselves into that state of emotional and performative intensity so they achieve it nevertheless. Alex continues:

There's this way in which in the Balkans, it's all about having the right stimuli: the music, the space to dance, the food, the drink, the atmosphere, the people. I think the way that it becomes emotionalized is through the body and it comes to feel very natural for people and because of that it's never questioned.

With these words, Alex smiles. Both him and I feel nostalgic talking about “high kefi (usually achieved at dawn)” (Caraveli, 1985, p. 278). We chat about our experiences with *ćef*, with dancing, singing, and *kolos*. We talk about future opportunities, and we plan to meet soon, “as soon as this pandemic is over.” Intentionally deciding to complete our conversation on a high note, we agree to dance together on Zoom. One cannot but to wonder what will happen with our *ćef*.

**Daniela Ivanova-Nyberg,  
Bulgarian Cultural and Heritage Center of Seattle, USA**

I hear the first notes of *Džangurica* and I rush towards the centre of the hall. I look for Daniela in her fairy-like white dress. I see her and she turns toward me at the same time. Our eyes meet and she extends her hand, signaling me to join her at *kolo*, or *horo* as they call it in Bulgaria. We dance *Džangurica*, a relatively new Bulgarian choreography, a dance based on Pirin Macedonia's traditional dance pattern. Her hand feels small in my hand. She dances like a fairy: light and magical, almost not touching the floor. She dances with an ease that only the native dancers can experience. I know *Džangurica* well, but I am not native to it. It took me a long time to understand it and to convince my body to accept it. To embrace it and become it—live it. *Džangurica* is danced in 9/8 time, a 1-2,1-2,1-2,1-2-3 phrase. I am genetically accustomed to the Serbian rhythm characterized by its simple musical and dancing meter such as 2/4 time, a 1-2,1-2 phrase. *Džangurica* is challenging me and *moja duša se inati!*<sup>141</sup> Thus, I dance it with *ćef*!

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<sup>141</sup> In Serbian for “My spirit (soul) is stubborn and persistent” [my translation] (see Inat section).



## ***Dancer, Choreographer, Philosopher, Ethnographer, Philologist, Teacher***

Several years ago, when I first met Daniela, we decided to talk about our mutual passion for folkloric expression and our individual approaches. However, the busyness of our lives had pushed us to 2020 with its global pandemic and life on Zoom. Interestingly, neither one of us seemed to mind meeting on Zoom. On the contrary, I suspect that we both welcome this unexpected opportunity to connect in a quest space and begin to discuss topics sitting on our agenda far too long.

While I know some parts of Daniela's biography, I still ask her to tell me about her journey. Daniela begins with her experience as a philosophy teacher. Before coming to the States, she worked in a high school in Sofia with an intensive program in music, Bulgarian choreography, and visual arts. At the same time, she was working on completing her Ph.D. in ethnochoreology at the Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Daniela was teaching philosophy and ethnography to senior high school students in this school. There were students with whom she had worked seven to eight years earlier, but as a choreography teacher.

To me and these young people, 17 or 18 year-olds and involved in folk dancing since their early ages, the subjects of philosophy, ethnography, and choreography made an exciting bridge. The philosophical way of thinking offers new perspectives to their inherited and also acquired knowledge. I am still passionate about this idea of intergenerational and interdisciplinary learning and different approaches to passing the knowledge.

Daniela was always interested in dance, arts, literature, languages, history, and philosophy. She began her career as a choreographer after graduating with a BA from Sofia's Institute for Music and Choreography. Then she continued her study at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," graduating with MA in Bulgarian philology, specializing in folkloristics and MA in philosophy with a second major in culturology (studies of culture). Studying these disciplines, as she shared, was a blessing to her, and it created many opportunities. Daniela's biggest realization that she did not know anything about traditional folklore came with her first years at Sofia University. She knew how to dance folkloric dances—her first teacher when she was four or five years old was her grandmother, a native from the region near Sofia. Daniela, however, grew up in the most prestigious children's ensemble in Sofia, and her knowledge about "folk" was mainly related to the "folk" stage choreographies. After her first MA in Bulgarian philology and



presenting well-accepted research on traditional nestinari<sup>142</sup> ritual and contemporary fire dancing, her professor in folklore invited Daniela to become her teaching assistant.

In this position as an assistant in cultural and social anthropology, while working as a choreographer at the school and with university students' ensemble, Daniela spent two years decoding Christmas Koledari<sup>143</sup> songs and fairy tales. Upon the end of that period, she connected her expertise in dance and choreography with folkloric tales, songs, rituals, and other cultural practices. Crucial for the expansion of her knowledge became her field research. In 2000–2002 Daniela received a grant from the Research Support Scheme, Prague, Open Society Institute for her two-year full-time research project “The Folk Dance Today”—Field research in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. The collected material essentially informed her dissertation and her teaching repertoire. After her many years of being involved in different programs, artistic projects, researches, and lecturing at several prestigious universities in Bulgaria and the United States, in 2008, Daniela moved to the USA.

### ***Bulgarian Mlada Emigracia (Recent Immigrants)***

Even though this was a move away from her cultural origin, Daniela became even more involved in the Bulgarian heritage. She has continued to research, and this time, her interest was the development of Bulgarian cultural studies in the diaspora. She had conducted a study and presented her findings at the 27th symposium ICTM study group on ethnochoreology in Limerick, Ireland in 2012.

It has been fascinating to me to observe how one particular dance phenomenon captures the spirit of its time. The Bulgarian folk dance movement in the United States resembles features of the dynamic folk dance scene in Bulgaria, shaped by both processes of continuity and innovation. Simultaneously, the Bulgarian dance repertoire is shaped by the American circumstances and larger processes of globalization. As such, this repertoire deserves closer observation, one that embraces its many dimensions and complexity. (Ivanova-Nyberg, 2014, p. 89)

But as a preparation for this extensive study, Daniela recorded her observations on the Balkan folk dance phenomenon in the USA. We discuss the idea of traditional

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<sup>142</sup> Nestinari is the Bulgarian word for the people who walk barefoot on burning embers, and the ritual is called Nestinarstvo.

<sup>143</sup> See Kolo Births Us section for a discussion on Koledari.



knowledge and how traditional practices in diaspora may vary from its cultural origin, such as Bulgaria or Serbia. In such cases, how do we insist on following one tradition, even if that may be the “original,” and mark the other as incomplete, younger, and developed in another place. Daniela points us to her paper “A ‘Balkan folk dance’ phenomenon in the United States: A few analytical observations.”

My curiosity about the nature of Balkan folk dancing in the United States arose with the first folk dance event I attended at the Hungarian House in New York City in 2003. The American folk dancers managing the evening played a Bulgarian, Macedonian, Greek, Serbian, or Romanian, dance piece after another. While listening to some familiar tunes from Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, I believed I knew what the steps were, and I was ready to jump into the crowd right away. It took a moment to realize that I had to be careful about jumping in. Often, what I assumed a particular melody implied as dance steps, was not exactly what I expected or was something I did not expect at all. I was questioning myself: “Does this not-recognizing-‘my’ dances stem from a lack of knowledge of the subject? Or was I witnessing choreographies which I had no way to be familiar with? Or was the answer that American folk dancers obviously had in their repertoire traditional Balkan dances, but they also had many new choreographed dances based on enjoyable Balkan music? (Ivanova-Nyberg, 2011, pp. 39-40)

We discuss both of our field research and lived experiences. We discuss Minja Laušević’s study on American fascination with Balkan cultures. Laušević (2015) concluded her book with a seemingly simple offering that deeply resonates with both Daniela’s and my observations:

Those who stumble upon the scene will continue to weave Balkan music and dance into their own lives, social, cultural, artistic and political spheres as they see fit. New generations of “villagers” will surely find their own reasons and meanings, will have their own needs and vision for maintaining the “village.” And, most likely, they will interleave these new ideas and practices with recycled materials and “inherited folk culture” to create an American home of their own design as did the generations before them. (p. 241)

Daniela and I agree there are increasingly more recent immigrants who join these “villages” as “native” Balkan dancers, and who continue to link them with a “source of knowledge”—the Balkan motherlands.

Daniela tells me a story about Podkrepa. Podkrepa is a social organization founded in 1939 to help introduce Bulgarians and Macedonians in Portland, Oregon to their new country, the USA. She shares that the first couple who founded the



organization was a bride was from Bulgaria and a groom was from North Macedonia, so they call it the Bulgarian-Macedonian association. We laugh at the beauty of the love story and absurdity of wars and political borders. She continues telling the story of how initially, they organized to support each other, but they closed their doors to the others—they did not welcome any new members as they really wanted only this old generation of old blood Bulgarians and Macedonians.

However, in 1995, 96, and 97 a new generation of Bulgarians came to the USA as new immigrants trying to look for jobs, a better future, and a better life. There was this huge wave of Bulgarian immigrants at the time. They heard about Podkrepa and they went there asking for help. Initially, the organization was not too keen to help them, but it was actually the grandchild of the first couple that realized that if they don't open the doors to these new coming Bulgarians, the organization will perish because there is no fresh blood coming in. Their generation was vanishing gradually and there was nobody to take over. They listened, opened their doors, and adjusted. Podkrepa's goal was to unite Bulgarians, Macedonians, American Macedonians and American Bulgarians and to promote Bulgarian and Macedonian educational and cultural activities.

### ***Bulgarian Migration Studies***

Daniela and I discuss her latest interest in Bulgarian migrations. She shares that she is currently working on a book about Bulgarian dance in migration describing various periods up to the present day. The spark for this book was given by invitation to deliver a presentation and teach a class at The Gallatin School, New York University (2013). Together with teaching, Daniela was asked to prepare 20 pages about Bulgarian dance. She shares that she struggled to condense such a vast topic into a very brief paper.

I finally wrote those twenty pages of my introduction to the Bulgarian dance history, which represents the beginning of the book. After that, I wrote about Americans bringing Bulgarian dance into the States. Then, I focused on present times and how Bulgarians are now discovering Bulgarian traditional dance because of their need to get together as a community, socialize, and connect with their roots and ancestry.

Daniela shares that her attitude toward folklore is the driving force for many of the initiatives in which she is involved.

It is much more than a simple "let's dance!" It is more than just jumping around. I am not saying that joy is not part of it. The joy of dancing, per se, is a phenomenal need for us as human beings. I believe that the mind and body come together with dancing and music, but it is more than that. For example, we are a Bulgarian culture organization, so it is



not just dancing any kind of dance. It is the Bulgarian dance repertoire (that keeps the connection with the “classical” folklore tradition) that we embrace, so people who decide on this form are thinking beyond “let’s get together and jump.” They have different needs.

### ***Нашата Носия (Our Traditional Clothing)***

Daniela continues talking about the wearing of traditional clothing—costumes collected via various connections from villages, festivals, antiquary shops, and relatives. She mentions that she sees the practice of costumes, as mainly people would refer to it in that way, as a personal experience.

I am very happy with the group of people with whom I am currently working. When they wear costumes, they think of this awareness as being transported into a different reality and they love it and they developed this kind of attitude I have toward the costume. My approach somehow got dispersed. I somehow infected them and I’m beyond happy because of that. I have recently listened to them discussing how to best put together the costume from the Šop area. Now they have an understanding that you cannot dance a dance from Pirin and wear a costume from the Šop region. They have developed this integrity which is absolutely essential to present on stage. Since they wanted to do something on stage, I believe we should do it to our best knowledge.

### ***The Importance of Teaching***

Daniela and I continue talking about the importance of being well-prepared while teaching. She is very passionate about this topic. Daniela, who has a very calm and composed appearance and is always graceful with a blissful smile, suddenly takes a sharper tone. Her tone is almost stern and she explains her position.

It is very, very important who the teachers are. Who are the people introducing Bulgarian dance—to children especially—and what their educational background is. Teaching is one of the topics I discuss in my book, which I firmly believe is essential. The choreographer is a “cultural hero,” a mediator between two worlds, who passes knowledge related to (or stemming from) our cultural past to contemporary people. The initiators who started to lead dance groups are sometimes unaware of the tremendous responsibility they accepted. They take the position to introduce folk dance and folk dancing to some folks for the first time. It is like opening a different world. It depends on who you are as a person and professional and what kind of perspective you’ll present, isn’t it so? Because our students, old or young, are “virgins” to this topic, it is crucial how you will show it. If you offer this topic respect and knowledge, your students will learn and develop a similar attitude based on yours.





Daniela and I continue discussing transformative experiences of folkloric dance, for example: what happens to dancers after five years of dancing in a folkloric group? Daniela shares she has experienced these transformative qualities first-hand; she also witnessed a similar thing happen to her colleagues, dance peers, and her students.

Dancing is an exciting part of one's life. Many Bulgarians, who are now part of the Bulgarian folk dance groups across the States, never had an aptitude for folk music, dance, costumes, etc. However, at some point, after living in the States for a decade or so, they began supporting local cultural organizations and schools, began responding to the opportunities to involve their children in learning the Bulgarian language and dance, and started dancing and even performing. For many people, dance has become so essential that they cannot imagine their lives without it anymore. They cannot return to their previous state of being or way of being from five years ago. This new knowledge changes them. Us. We hear things differently; our body feels things differently. We understand the community differently, we enjoy life differently—so it is a profound change in one's life.

We wholeheartedly agree. We laugh because we are so happy to hear each other speak about this vital aspect of folkloric dance. We continue discussing how this notion of dance as transformation is even more pronounced for the people who take the position to lead dance groups. For example, these new leaders might have very little previous dance experience, but it happens that in their community they are the most knowledgeable people, now finding themselves in leading positions. They should also realize their responsibility in every aspect of teaching such as: how they are looking for knowledge material, for music, for ideas, for accompanying stories.

### ***Looking Ahead***

It was only through pure serendipity that Daniela is my last collocutor. As I write about her and with that “paint” this last portrait, I am physically tired and mentally, emotionally, and spiritually fully rejuvenated. Daniela praises my ideas and my work and shares her enthusiasm for us working together in the future.

We have a lot in common! What I'm hearing from you, we absolutely have many common themes. With your background in arts... there are new opportunities. For example, since we started with Medena Pitka<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> The children's folk dance group “Medena Pitka” [Round honey bread]—to feed and sweeten souls and senses—was established in 2013 at the Bulgarian Cultural and Heritage Center of Seattle (BCHCS). Since then, Daniela has served as an artistic director for Medena Pitka and Seattle Cheta Performance Group (adults) at the BCHCS, working as the coordinator for Glagolnitsata Society for Poetry and Literature.



we are evolving toward the arts—you can see now during the pandemic times since it is difficult to teach children via zoom, I would ask them to draw drawings related to folklore dances and present them on zoom. I'm trying to incorporate fairy tales, songs so we can have our classes uninterrupted with the pandemic. Vesna, that is exactly what you're saying about holistic approach to traditional knowledge. Dancing is just one aspect of this folklore knowledge...

We spend our last minutes on Zoom exchanging ideas on how to engage further, how to keep our groups alive, and how to be involved in one way or another. We strategize how to keep our educational work, combining arts and dance in these pandemic times, alive and thriving. Despite seeing her through the screen of my computer, I feel Daniela's warmth coming through, hugging me. We make plans to speak soon and she wishes me great success and great joy in the meantime. I know the success will come out of this great joy I feel being supported by people like her. I feel honoured and humbled to be in this circle, in this kolo.

Wait, the music is starting again, get ready—the last kolo begins...



## Kolo Births Us

### *Ženidba Sjajnoga Mjeseca*

*Фалила се звијезда Даница:  
“Оженићу сјајнога Мјесеца,  
Испросићу Муњу од облака,  
Окумићу Бога јединога,  
Дјеверићу и Петра и Павла,  
Старог свата светога Јована,  
Војеводу светога Никољу,  
Коџијаша светога Илију.”  
Што се фали звијезда Даница.  
Што се фали, то јој и Бог дао:  
Оженила сјајнога Мјесеца,  
Окумила Бога јединога,  
Одјевери и Петра, и Павла,  
Старог свата светога Јована,  
Војеводу светога Никољу,  
Коџијаша светога Илију.  
Стаде Муња даре дијелити:  
Даде Богу небесне висине,  
Светом Петру Петровске врућине,  
А Јовану леда и снијега,  
А Николи на води слободу,  
А Илију муње и стријеле.  
(Stefanović Karadžić, 1891, p. 250)*

### The Wedding of the Bright Moon

The Morning Star boasts:  
“I will marry the bright Moon,  
I will engage with the clouds' Lightning,  
The One True God will be the best man  
Saint Peter and Paul, my brothers-in-law  
And Saint John will be a banner-bearer  
The first witness Saint Nickolas,  
And the coachman Saint Elijah.”  
What the Morning Star boasts,  
What she boasts, the God gives her:  
She marries the bright Moon,  
With the One True God as a best man,  
Saints Peter and Paul as brothers-in-law,  
Saint John as a banner-bearer,  
The first witness Saint Nickolas,  
And the coachman Saint Elijah.  
The Lightning starts sharing the gifts:  
He gave the God the heights of heaven,  
To Saint Peter the summer's heat,  
To Saint John ice and snow,  
To Saint Nickolas his sea freedom, and  
To Saint Elijah lightning and thunders.



*Њксер држи потков, потков држи коња, коњ јунака, јунак град, а град земљу.*

*The nail holds the horseshoe, the horseshoe holds the horse, the horse the hero, the hero the city, and the city the world. ~ Serbian proverb*

The story of Igranka continues.

## **Igranka, Part V: Oro, Dancing Like an Eagle**

Most of the elderly visitors and families with little children already left and the evening igranka is just about to begin. My girls still play with their friends and refuse to go home. Today is the final day of the summer break and I do not want to spoil our last moments of freedom. School starts on Tuesday, and we have two days to get back to a serious and proper form. It amazes me how during the festival, we completely disregard our regular routine, how we turn toward hedonistic behaviour, and intentionally lose ourselves in the utopianistic Little Serbia. Everything Serbian becomes a synonym for good living and every thought of our regular lives provokes a stomach pain that we want to bury deep down and not mention until we absolutely cannot avoid it anymore.

Without days like these, we increasingly become something else, something unnatural, some pitiful love children of two incompatible worlds. Without an occasional travel back to the ancestry lane, we bury our true personas deep, and the longer we hide them, the more we morph into awkward outlandish shapes. While we assure ourselves we adapted to this life long ago, occasionally and when we least expect it, our true personas boisterously surface during an office meeting or a parent-teacher conference. At those moments, we apologize and promise that was not who we are, even though deep inside we know the truth. Thus, we need to attend festivals, igrankas, and similar gatherings to awake from the numbness; to eat, sing, and dance with *ćef*<sup>145</sup>; to live felicitously—breathing life with full lungs.

I start to make my way back to the main building. The improbable gamut of orange, pink, and deep purple replaced the bright joyous blue sky from earlier today. The shadows got longer and the street lights turned on. A faint contour of the full moon becomes stronger with every passing moment. It will soon shine brightly against the

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<sup>145</sup> See *Ćef* section.



darkness of a late summer night sky. I see Kalina and her friends run between the people and disappear behind the building. I loudly inhale prepared to shout and ask about her sister, but Ana suddenly appears in front of me and counting aloud, hastily following the girls. I only have a moment to remind them to take care of each other before she disappears after them. A man leaning on the building smiles: “Just like us when we were kids!” He sounds nostalgic. We all do. We feel nostalgic not only for the time passed, but for the place we left long ago.

More people move to the tented area with long benches and tables that sit at least a dozen. I like the wit behind the sign “Kafana”<sup>146</sup>. Even though it does not look like any kafana at all, the atmosphere resembles it closely. The live band consisting of three tamburicas<sup>147</sup> and one accordion blends with the amplified music coming from the main building. I enter the area so I can enjoy the gentle sounds of four men playing and singing to starogradska<sup>148</sup> music. The people at the packed tables eat meze<sup>149</sup>, drink, and sing along, holding each other’s shoulders and swaying to the rhythm of the music. I sit on a nearby step and focus on the lyrics:

*“Plava luna vedrim zrakom u prelesti divno teče  
ispod polja zvjezdanije u proljećnu tihu večer,  
sijlje zrake magičeske, čuvstva tajna neka budi,  
te smrtnika žedni pogled u dražesti slatkoj bludi...”*<sup>150</sup>

This song is not often performed, and I am surprised to hear it here. I savour its every word. The poem Night Gathers the Life is one of the most beautiful love poems ever written. It was composed in 1844 by Peter II Petrović Njegoš, a Montenegrin Bishop at the time. They say because of his function as a spiritual leader, it was ungodly for him to have romantic feelings, so his secretary burned the poem, but he was determined to

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<sup>146</sup> In Serbian for a type of bistro which primarily serves alcoholic beverages and coffee, and often also light snacks (meze) and other food. Most kafanas feature live music performances.

<sup>147</sup> In Serbian for a traditional long-necked lute (plucked string) instrument meaning “little tamboura” popular in Balkans.

<sup>148</sup> In Serbian for “old city music”—an urban traditional folk music of Serbia.

<sup>149</sup> In Serbian for a selection of small dishes or light snacks such as cold cuts, cheese, pickled vegetables (turšija) served as appetizers.

<sup>150</sup> In Montenegrin for “The blue moon flows beautifully with clear air in its splendor.

under a field of stars on a quiet spring evening,  
pour out the rays of magic, let the secret feelings awaken,  
and a mortal thirsty gaze in the pleasantness of sweet lust.” [my translation].



save it somehow and when he died, they found the copy in his left breast pocket of his undershirt. On his heart they say. I know some lines and I sing along gently. More people gather close to me. We listen, tranquil with the mysticism the lyrics offer. His stirring musings about a mysterious woman and his sorrowfulness when the “moon fled the horizon and he lost sight of his divine dame” feels somber, yet empowering. The Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, an influential Montenegrin poet and philosopher, one of the greatest people of our region, writes the beautiful truth about his love and misery and decides to leave his legacy behind. For us. To remind us about our ontological responsibility and right<sup>151</sup>. Thus, we should never forget who we are. I trust we are here to remember our origins through the beauty of songs and dances.

The song ends and we applaud. With each clap, I pass to the musicians my gratitude. My understanding of the enormity of their work. My plea to never abandon it. To never forget the songs.

The music from the upper hall overpowers the acoustic sounds of the tamburica band. I hear the first accords of Crnogorsko Oro, kolo from Montenegro and I rush upstairs to watch it. Half of my genetic heritage is Montenegrin, thus, this kolo is close to my heart and represents more than a dance. The sounds of gusle<sup>152</sup> dominate the space. A few people form a half circle kolo and march to the right. A few more join as they change directions and march to the left. People on the sidelines begin to clap, giving the dancers a tempo. More people join. I wonder who will be the first man to begin the “eagle<sup>153</sup>” dance in the centre of kolo. Or maybe a woman. Not too many people at this church identify as Montenegrins, so I am surprised that they even play this kolo. As Selena<sup>154</sup> said—the most powerful patrons either hire or generously tip the musicians and that way, dominate the entertainment. Typically, men engage in these activities, contributing to the patriarchal permanency. I recognize that despite the ostensive emancipation of women in the last decades, we perform as the same patriarchal society from centuries ago. Still appreciative of the advance, albeit rather slow, I look around in

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<sup>151</sup> “Poetry can awake a sense of responsibility toward nature by describing the aesthetic beauty of natural things. One cannot be indifferent to the survival of something of whose beauty we are aware” (Llewelyn, 1991, p. 115).

<sup>152</sup> See the Montenegro section.

<sup>153</sup> See Leap into Crnogorsko Oro in this section.

<sup>154</sup> See Portraits section.



attempt to recognize a proud Montenegrin ordering the songs. More people gather and some youth as well. I see Kalina and Ana peeking around the corner.

My hairdresser Marija goes into the circle and starts dancing—hops on one foot several times lightly touching the floor with the other foot's toes for balance. Then switches legs. Her head is slightly tilted forward and she only occasionally lifts her eyes towards her partner. A young man swiftly enters the centre and starts dancing opposite of Marija. She smiles broadly. He nods and continues to dance, occasionally spinning and then faces her again. He follows the same steps as her, except his arms are outstretched portraying an eagle's wings and he bounces higher. He puts a great strength into these jumps. The rhythm is extremely demanding on the dancers' bodies, so the centre couples swap every few rounds.

There is so much more to this dance than what appears at first sight. Only knowledgeable and experienced dancers know how to achieve the envisioned performance of the Eagle Dance. Through the right combination of movements, they direct the observers into seeing them as they wish to be seen. Marija and her partner dance perfectly. She looks elegant and beautiful, striking yet humble; he looks handsome and respectable, yet daring and brazen. They incite us to feel proud and envious at the same time—a feeling not often experienced.

Another couple go into the circle to replace Marija and her partner. It is enjoyable to watch them, but not as arresting as the first one. Somebody grabs my hand and pulls me into the centre. My friend's husband Boban smiles. Encouraging me. "Ajde Crnogorko!"<sup>155</sup> I laugh and we start to dance. I close my eyes visualizing my parents, uncles, and aunts dancing. I see my Montenegrin grandmother as a young girl—she dances humbly with her eyes bowed but still smiling playfully. Through her movements, she is teaching me what she knows, what she learned from her grandmother, and what I should pass further. I look at Boban and he is signaling me to continue for one more round. I am happy to dance, but my body aches. We both hop high and laugh. His extended arms feel as a cover and protection. We spin around each other and at one moment I face the others who were holding hands in kolo. I meet the young woman's gaze and I see she and her friend are ready to relieve us. I turn toward Boban and I start

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<sup>155</sup> In Serbian for "Let's go Montenegrin woman!" [my translation].



to go backwards into kolo. He follows and another couple go in. It feels reassuring knowing that there will always be someone to continue the dance...

## Montenegrin (Crnogorsko) Oro: Notation and Movement Pattern

Our fifth kolo is Crnogorsko<sup>156</sup> oro from Montenegro, also known as the Eagle dance. According to the legend, when the ancient Montenegrins wanted to create their own national dance, they hesitated for a long time, not knowing whether to invent something completely new or to borrow some of their dances from their neighbours. “But, the Montenegrins said, we will not take anything from others. We, the children of the mountains who live beside the clouds, will take the dance of the eagle.”

Crnogorsko oro is the most popular kolo in Montenegro. Both man and women dance together and a line of dance (LOD) is clockwise or to the left. This oro can be open (formed circle) or closed (formed half-circle). The Montenegrin oro starts with all dancers, men and women, standing straight, holding hands or each other's belts. Then they begin to move back and forth (LOD and opposite), at first with slower steps, then faster and faster, and finally merge into one general circle. The circle grows as more dancers join. The movement continues, the circle turns into a triangle, an ellipse, a pentagon and other geometric figures, according to the skill and resourcefulness of the dancers. Sometimes the circle is broken up into several separate circles that repeat the same figures and then, at the sign of the kolovodja<sup>157</sup>, they gracefully reunite into a common one. Typically, dancers sing:

*Hajde u kolo, dušo moja  
Hajde u kolo.*<sup>158</sup>

One of the bravest men enters the circle and starts dancing in the style of imitating an eagle (see Figure 37). A woman joins soon after, often the man's wife, girlfriend, or another who is attracted to his dance. The man's dance moves symbolize a strong eagle and he dances with outstretched and raised arms. The woman with hands

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<sup>156</sup> In Serbian for Montenegrin.

<sup>157</sup> In Serbian for a ringleader.

<sup>158</sup> In Montenegrin for “Let's go to the circle, my dear, let's go to the circle.” [my translation].





down also mimics an eagle, but in a much more elegant way. Their movements depict honourable mannerism of Montenegrin men and modesty and discretion of Montenegrin women. The male dancer occasionally jumps from one leg to the other, graciously forms circles, raises his arms high above his head, lowers them or waves with them, portraying the movements of an eagle's flight. From time to time, he shouts wildly and loudly, or in the old times, a man would also take a revolver and shoot it close to his calm and composed female dance companion. Opposite of him, shy, blushing, with downcast eyes, a female dancer follows his movements, as if recognizing his advantage and beauty in advance. With his movements, he appears as floating in the air above her head, protecting her from other large birds.

When the couple gets tired, they stop dancing, acknowledge each other by kissing on the cheeks, and the other couple jumps in a circle, while the singing in the audience continues without interruption. Usually, young men end up dancing Montenegrin oro in two vertical circles, standing on each other's shoulders.



**Figure 37**

*Oro Crnogosko, Aquarelle and Ink on Paper, Maljković, 2020*



## Telling and Re-Telling the Stories (Discussion and Dissemination Stage)

Upon completing the first two consecutive, blended, and iterative stages—firstly, the research stage or taking heed of the stories and secondly, the analysis and the synthesis stage or hermeneutically attending to the stories, I eagerly approach the last stage of discussion and dissemination or telling and re-telling the stories. My progression through these stages was not always anticipated and linear, rather it comprised of many unexpected repetitions and turns: “It is not an iteration but an itineration” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 410, as cited in Ingold, 2013, p. 307).

To share my findings, I enact literary *métissage*, again, using *kolo* metaphorically. *Kolo* has been a generative model to engage and understand my progression throughout this research: it has empowered me to conceptualize and shape my work. While I was in the first stage and I listened to my collocutors’ stories, I imagined observing their *kolos* and listening to their music. When I moved to the second stage and I hermeneutically attended to their stories, I imagined learning their *kolos*, the new steps and rhythms. In this stage, I imagine combining the steps and tunes and arranging them in new *kolos*. These newly arranged conspicuously multifarious *kolos* epitomized my findings—the teachings I share forward. In writing, I present them using literary *métissage*.

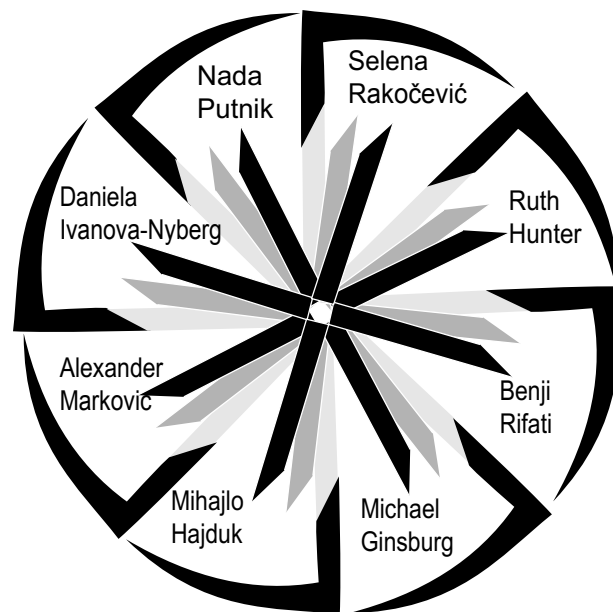
My collocutors’ narratives at first seemed fully distinct and unconnected (see Figure 34). All eight collocutors brought their own unique perspectives and means of being engaged in folkloric practices, thus, they all shared very specific teachings. I have selected them based on their involvement with these traditional cultural practices, and many of them have never interacted among themselves and possibly never will. When I first engaged in the conversations with my collocutors, I have sensed a faint energy that each of them radiated. It was difficult to isolate and recognize it, but as I spent more time with them and their narratives, I was finally able to understand it. While being demonstrated slightly differently, all of them presented unusually dedicated, passionate, and in-depth immersion in their respective traditional cultures. I envisioned this faint energy that grew into strongly apparent sentiment, as it was creating little cracks in the walls at first, which then eventually flowed stronger and opened the dividers between the collocutors (see Figure 38). It created a communal feeling that I recognized as



communitas (Turner, 2012). Even though my collocutors were located in different countries—even continents, and I spoke to them over the span of almost eighteen months, there was an undeniable connection among all of them. Turner (2012) explained that communitas “comes unexpectedly, like the wind, and it warms people toward their fellow human beings” (p. 3). Like sunflowers who track the sun during their growth period, my collocutors oriented themselves in relation to the Balkan traditional cultures.

**Figure 38**

*Collocutors Portraits with Influence Kolovrat*



One of my first observations was my collocutors’ inner rhythm and their relation to the music. I noted that neither one of them would be able to keep their hearts from trembling with excitement when they heard the sounds of Trite Pati, Moravac, or Pembe, which are some of the most recognized Balkan kolos. In the same vein, I am certain that any other Balkan kolo would affect them with the same intensity. All of my collocutors—the ones with Balkan roots and the ones without, through their engagement, have expressed their thorough understanding of Balkan rich cultures, wonderful nature, and ethnic diversity, as well as its turbulent history, national strife, and frequent civil wars. Almost equally represented by joyful and melancholic practices, Balkan music carries happiness and sorrow in its complex rhythm, arousing the need for being in kolo to



celebrate or overcome hardship as it was frequently the only consolation, a practice often difficult to grasp for someone not intimate with this traditional cultural knowledge. I acknowledge that present-day people typically connect with music for joyous occasions, however, this is not the case in Balkan traditions<sup>159</sup>. I was not surprised to learn that my collocutors seem to profoundly connect this Balkan practice well and those who were not born into it, with practice became “alive to it” [emphasis in original] (Ingold, 2013, p. 308). Through their recognition of Balkan rhythm and tunes, they acknowledge and appreciate the tacit knowledge carried in those. It is important to note that through my years of being deeply immersed in cultural practices and this research, I have encountered many individuals who do not possess this tacit knowledge, even though they were born, raised, and living within the Balkan cultures. In fact, it is my observation that most Serbian people who are not immersed in traditional cultural practices as I discussed earlier<sup>160</sup>, namely close to the centre of cultural teachings (see Figure 21a, b), might not be aware or even interested in this traditional knowledge. As the rest of the global population, in the last couple of centuries, Serbia also experienced a “rural push” phenomenon. As a result of the world and the local wars’ destructions, a decline in income from agriculture, weakened local economy and job opportunities, many people migrated to big cities. For example, in 2022, Belgrade’s population is close to 2 million, while in 1950, it was just over 400,000. With that massive demographic change, coupled with socialism political system which averted regular religious practices, in the last hundred years, the urban Serbian population lost most of their customary interaction with traditional culture, and with that, faded its traditional knowledge. While I discuss this issue in a Serbian context, I am certain that we can observe a similar phenomenal in many other nations or cultures.

As I progressed through the conversations with my collocutors and later through hermeneutic processes and writing, as I spent time with their stories, the themes began to become evident. I have observed similarities in their understandings which I interpreted as their teachings. Based on their perspective and positionality, some collocutors favoured specific topics and some lingered in the other ones. I have chosen

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<sup>159</sup> See Cultural activities as a necessity in human progression section.

<sup>160</sup> See The Pedagogy of Ceremonies, Rituals, and Other Cultural Practices section.



to dedicate further discussions on what appeared to be the thickest overlap, and have decided to leave out some, for now, minor threads of conversations.

The following four emergent ideas have dominated the conversations and appeared to carry the most impact, thus formed into themes:

- Building community as part of holistic education and development;
- Recognizing cultural activities as a necessity in human progression;
- Acknowledging interconnectedness; and
- Allowing diversity and continual change.

In addition to the aforementioned themes, unexpectedly, some of my collocutors have shared the overpowering stories of systemic racism, nationalistic conflicts, and intergenerational trauma. From their vulnerable positions, they have generously offered their stories and I respectfully hold them, and as teachings am passing it forward.

Each of the four sections begin with the literary *métissage*—textual weaving of my collocutor’s voices. I believe it is important to include them, “as these voices interact on the page without interference, mediation, or imposition of the voice of the researcher” (Hanson, 2016, p. 260). As I progress through each theme, I will share my understandings as well.

## **Building Community as Part of Holistic Education and Development**

While all eight collocutors held different positions and shared different experiences on community building, this emergent theme seem to be the one that affected them all the most. This is what they said:

You don’t have to be at home to feel at home... It was important for us to know our children can see us engaged in an activity we love, with people we respect, with community we support. With that, we were crocheting the Serbian social milieu. (Nada)

It is important to Serbs in diaspora: when people go to Serbian church, they are constructing their identities at the moment of that dance, that kolo. Now, how do they construct that identity? They construct it through those kolos, like our predecessors have been for ages. (Selena)

First and foremost, I look at our family—it’s really the communal aspect of folklore, the community, that is important. The Balkan folklore camp



stopped being a 'fantasy' week and became a real community. Because you can build a real community. (Ruth)

Even if I didn't play music, I would still identify as Rom, but playing music is still a good way to keep in touch with my identity and culture. However, I think that the language is a big part of that too, that's why I have such a big desire to learn the language...I have to rely on going there and talking to my family in Romanes as much as possible so I can pick the language up more and more. (Benji)

Friend of mine is saying: I never went to church, but this is my church. This is where I go to get my social support, my social fix. There is a very strong community among Balkan dancers, and now there is a strong community among musicians who play Balkan music. (Michael)

The entire village was so excited so everyone would cut their grass, paint their fruit trees in front of their houses, and paint their houses. It was so excited because people from all over the place would come to the festival. We lived for it from year to year. It was amazing. (Mihajlo)

It felt almost like my father was afraid that somehow, I would enjoy [Greek dancing] so much that I would walk away from the Serbian things and only do these other things. I struggled as a teenager to try to explain to people, especially people in these ethnic communities, why I would be okay with exploring other people's traditions. (Alexander)

Podkrepa's goal is to unite Bulgarians, Macedonians, American Macedonians and American Bulgarians and to promote Bulgarian and Macedonian educational and cultural activities. (Daniela)

Even though I anticipated my collocutors sharing their different understanding and practice within communities, it was interesting to notice that each of the collocutors have used the term "community" in a slightly different connotation. Moreover, many of my collocutors, to varying degrees, spoke firstly, about *organizations* they recognize as their "community," and secondly, their individual contribution to building those communities or organizations. The exceptions were Selena, who did not speak about communities to which she belongs, but instead, shared her curiosity about community-building in diaspora, and Mihajlo, who spoke about his childhood memories of the community life in his village. In general, all of their observations corresponded to McMillan and Chavis (1986) who proposed four elements of sense of community:

The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the



group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. (p. 9)

The sense of belonging or the membership element seem to be not only the deciding factor, but also the driving force for the individual involvement as well as for the community development. Laušević (2015) also wrote about this topic and drew on Walters (1990) who “observed that people not only change the ethnic group with which they identify from one census to another, but that they pick, not the most dominant, but the most interesting/ unusual of the possible choices” (p. 22). Walters (1990) argued that

having an ethnic identity is something that makes you both special and simultaneously part of a community... And it allows you to express your individuality in a way that does not make you stand out as in any way different from all kinds of other people. (as cited in Laušević, 2015, p. 22)

This notion of changing the ethnic groups or picking the one with which they resonate the most was especially noticeable in the conversations with the collocutors from the USA: Ruth and Michael, and to a lesser extent, Alexander and Benji. In their cases, the ethnic group was replaced by the organization that represents “a community” to which they belong by choice. While Alexander served as the president of the organization for several years, it was mainly Ruth and Michael who spoke about their involvement with the East European Folklife Center (EEFC), the Northwest Balkan social media group, the Balkanalia camp, and Balkan Night Northwest event. For instance, Ruth shared that she has “a very complicated view of what folklore is and how it functions.” With that, Ruth shared the complexity of folklore and its inseparable ties with the community in which they live, as well as the community organizations in which they volunteer. Additionally, Ruth explicitly spoke about the importance of community engagement:

For me, folklore builds community, and we build the community, and I see the way that it kept us and our kids in. If we were just a nuclear family and we were on our own, that would not happen. We would not have the same support.

It was evident from her comments that she treated both with almost the same intensity: close circles of family and friends and the large organizations. She explained that one

can get to the camp for five or ten years and not know what people do for living but still connect with them on a profound level. When people got sick and people died and needed help, community responded





immediately. Then you know of what is your community made, when stuff like that happen. When times are hard.

Michael also belongs to the same or similar community organizations as well as local groups, and his responses were similar. Since he was a young teenager, and for close to sixty years, Michael stayed tightly connected to the Balkan community:

When I am out there playing sports, I fit in. But that is how I am with folklore as well. In fact, I treated dancing as another sport when I first started, but with added benefits of community.

However, it was one of Michael's comments that stood out for me: "*Americans are kind of in a strange place, people who consider themselves Americans haven't got their own folklore.*" Laušević (2015) wrote about this lack of "truly American" folklore and American fascination with Balkan cultures:

The community I became interested in was tied neither by the expected shared ethnic heritage nor by a particular location...One of my first discoveries was that these "Balkanites," as they often call themselves, were extremely active on the, then nascent, Internet. Before most Americans even had a home computer, they were already fostering musical community through Web sites, chat rooms, and especially through an e-mail list serve. (p. 5)

Daniela also spoke about her own research on American attraction toward Balkan cultures. She shared that "there are communities and individuals who are committed exclusively to Balkan music and dance...[that] grew mainly from a fascination toward the music and dances of the member countries of the former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria" (Ivanova-Nyberg, 2016, p. 217).

On the other hand, both Alexander and Benji, born and raised in the United States, identify as Serbian-American and Roma-American, and as such, have strong ties to the Serbian and Roma communities. Both of them shared their connection to the community organizations such as EEFC, but that was not their initial orientation. On the personal level, they first connected to their respective ethnic groups, and second to the local and smaller communities.

My collocutors also spoke about *working on* or *building* organizations, or their respective communities, which was my second interest in the community theme—the recognized sense of responsibility. This topic was most evident in Nada's, Mihajlo's, and Daniela's comments. While Nada and Mihajlo spoke about their personal experiences,



Daniela's perspective was from her position as a scholar and researcher. Since her move to the States in 2008, she began to research the phenomenon of the Bulgarian and Balkan folklore practices in the USA, and has written extensively on that subject. It is both personally and professionally that Daniela feels connected and responsible to the community. As an active board member, director/producer, teacher, choreographer, and performer in several organizations, she shared the sense of responsibility she feels herself, and is actively trying to instigate the same in others:

The people who started to lead dance groups might not be aware of the tremendous responsibility they accepted. They take the positions who introduce the folkloric dance for some for the first time. It is like opening a different world and of course it depends who you are as a person, what kind of perspective you'll present.

Nada's sense of responsibility and care for the community to which she belongs is evident in her life work. During our several formal and focused conversations and many other informal, Nada spoke about several social groups to which she feels connected. She spoke about the Vancouver International Folk Dancers (VIFD) club, the Serbian church club, and the one she founded and has been managing, the Gradina club. In addition, Nada is active in all other cultural gatherings, held at both Canadian and American west coast from British Columbia to California. She travels, teaches, dances, cooks, entertains, hosts, presents, and most of all, created opportunities for the rest of the interested folklorists. She shared that unfortunately, as these social clubs to which she belongs are not connected, she sees them as part of a larger community of good-willed people interested in traditional cultural folkloric practice. In a similar way as Daniela, Nada is also trying to instill the sense of community and responsibility in all of us.

Mihajlo spoke about community in a particularly romantic, nostalgic, and sentimental way. His sense of communal responsibility is connected to his childhood, learning folkloric dancing at the cultural events, and his personal contribution. In an almost idealistic way, he described how the village of 7,000 people would come together to host an annual festival.

As I engaged deeper into the hermeneutic processes, I was able to increasingly distinguish between the concepts of community and *communitas*, which was my third



focus for community examination. Turner (2012) insisted that *communitas* cannot be precisely defined.

*Communitas*—what is it? Trying to answer is like trying to locate and hold down an electron. It cannot be done. *Communitas* is activity, not an object or state. Therefore, the only way to catch these “electrons” in the middle of their elusive activity, in process, is to go along with them in the very rush of their impossible energy, “kissing the winged joy as it flies.” (p. 220)

In this context, I observe community as a social group that shares common values, goals, identity, tradition, and such, and *communitas* as an invigorating community spirit. Thus, when Selena, from her perspective as a scholar, spoke about Serbian diaspora in Vancouver, she was describing *communitas*: “*What kolos do they dance? What is so important to them that they go to Serbian church even if they live in Canada.*” She also spoke about her field research practice and her dependence on *communitas*, or community in action, to support her study:

Now, when I go, I go directly to *igranka*, I go purposely. And then I record them dancing to their own music. If I have more questions, the following day I’d seek interlocutors to clarify things, steps.

I recognize that we exist within community. We build community and in turn, community builds us. As *perpetuum mobile*, the process continues without halting with potential changes or repeats. With the expectancy of unity and harmony within community, we can expect increased phenomenon of *communitas*, which as I aforementioned argued, is the moving force. This yearning for harmony and unity is well-known and instilled in every Serbian person: the Serbian motto, also part of the Serbian cross on the Serbian Coat of Arms (see Figure 39) is *Samo Sloga Srbina Spašava* which translates to Only Unity Saves the Serbs, which is the ultimate goal for Serbian people.



**Figure 39**

*Serbian Coat of Arms*



I connect back to my research inquiry: *How do cultural activities, specifically folkloric dance, advance holistic learning and influence the development of the whole person?* Like a sea that shapes a rock over a long time, and little by little carves out a cave, I believe that traditional cultural practices create the space that matter, and create fertile grounds that grow passionate and dedicated individuals who build rich communities. In turn, and as I have personally experienced, these communities open and welcome, nurture, cherish, share, create, grow, teach, learn, heal, and most importantly, collect, keep, and pass the traditional knowledge, and with that, increase the capacity of the wholeness of our humanness.

In my conversation with Selena, however, she asked exceptionally important questions that are directing me toward unanticipated findings. When we discussed the traditional cultural practice within Serbian community in diaspora, she probed:



I ask about the repertoire: who influences what will they dance, what kolos will band play? What are the channels of power, who will pay for that music, who will negotiate with the band about the repertoire, who orders, who pays, how to follow the money trail and the power relationship in general?

I reflect on her inquiry: Indeed, who *controls* ‘the music’? Who chooses the values or inviolable principles? Whose “tradition” do we follow? Do we orient toward the cultural origin and original geographic border? Or the culture that we develop outside of that border? Who has the right to perform *our* dances? [emphasis added] (Ivanova-Nyberg, 2018). Does it really matter? While we strive “for ways to strengthen the social fabric with the development of sense of community” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 20), it is essential to take into consideration the concept of shared emotional connection or aligning the community values.

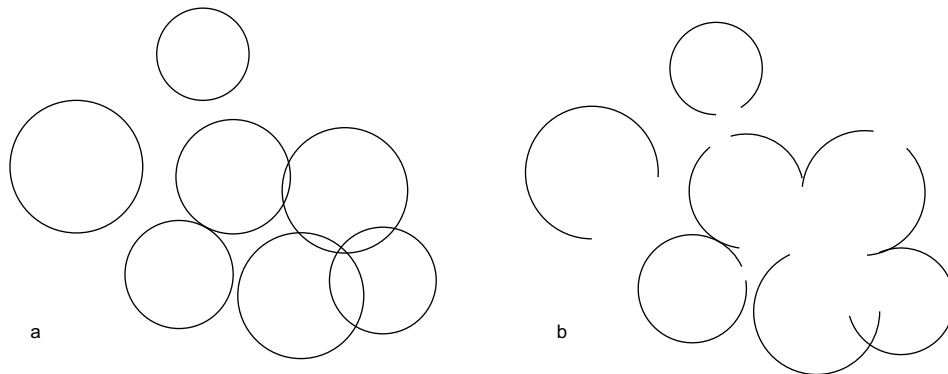
It is clear that sense of community is a powerful force in our culture now. This force does not operate just for good, however. In the South, the Ku Klux Klan is gaining in membership and power. Urban vigilante forces are forming to attack and intimidate people in the name of community. Neighborhoods advertised as exclusive communities are fencing themselves in to keep out people who do not belong and to separate themselves from poverty and problems of social justice. As the force of sense of community drives people closer together, it also seems to be polarizing and separating subgroups of people. The potential for great social conflict is increasing—a side of community that must be understood as well. *A critical examination of community is essential.* [emphasis added] (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 20)

Encompassing to the community values must be openness and inclusiveness. Far too often, we witness “inclusive” communities that tend to include only like-*minded* or like-*bodied* members while excluding all others, which observing from afar is only creating the fragmentation of society. If theoretically inclusive communities lack full openness and inclusiveness in practice, they only exist as separate units unable to ever merge into larger entities and strive toward wholeness. If communities truly open and include all interested to join, they will cease to exist as Venn diagrams, (that only further separate and fragment individuals into sub-communities), and eventually become amalgamated entities position to continue merging (see Figure 40).



## Figure 40

*Closed vs Opened Communities: a and b*



Contemplating on fragmentation and wholeness, Bohm (2002) argued that,

It is especially important to consider this question today, for fragmentation is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual; and this is leading to a kind of general confusion of the mind, which creates an endless series of problems and interferes with our clarity of perception so seriously as to prevent us from being able to solve most of them. (p. 1)

The process of healing and restoring our wholeness must begin by acknowledging and honouring “the hermeneutic diversity of the circle of knowledges, and by working respectfully, or in ethically relational ways, such that these processes lead to the capacity of being trans-systemically and trans-disciplinarily literate” (Kelly, 2021a, p. 184). Through this capacity we are then well positioned to create opportunities where we can continue this important healing process. For example, profoundly vital opportunity is learning from Onkwehonwe (Haudenosaunee word for the Haudenosaunee/Mohawk people) unassimilated, traditional Haudenosaunee people, who have been living in true harmony with all their relations. By nurturing “the unity, interrelation, and reciprocity between language and psychology, landscape and mind” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 366) they have maintained the wholeness and avoided fragmentation, distresses, and dis-ease of our time. Nurturing relational mind and preserving ethical relationality (Donald, 2012; Kelly, 2021a; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006) is the only way to maintain our health or even further, the only way to survive. We can survive only if we help one another, if we care for each other, or as Sheridan & Longboat (2006) mythopoetically



offered, “Onkwehonwe mind everything because everything minds Onkwehonwe” (p. 366).

An example of expiry due to the lack of ethical relationality is displayed in a story that Nada shared: Nada’s long-term involvement in several smaller folkloric dance communities that operated fully independent, in fact where Nada was the only connection, resulted in oversaturation (and often duplication) of offered activities that further caused Nada to leave and cease her involvement with some. These organizations declined at least partially merging and uniting resources—instead, continued to operate independently often to their detriment. Their narrow focus and inability to recognize the greater picture caused them to slow down at first, then cease of involvement, then all movement, and finally complete stagnation. Their lack of attention to the greater values and fear of loss of control resulted in irreparable inertia.

My husband Saša often says: *čovjek je čovek—ili nije*, which loosely translates to: a human is fully human—or is not, which I interpret as an invitation to bravely engage into being fully human. I cannot find precise answers to Selena’s questions, nor on mine. I do not want to offer a solution. Instead, I share a poem “Father” (Otac, n.d.) about a hero who was not afraid to engage into being fully human, which at the time, meant displaying qualities of heroism which encompasses courage, bravery, fortitude, unselfishness and desire for the common good, but also righteousness, mercy, sincerity, humility, and a brave heart—in short, what is believed to be a perfect being. Without getting into literary device analysis, I offer this folk poem as an example of how in the Serbian traditional culture, an ideal person—a hero, a protector, a father, a human or a man<sup>161</sup> is expected to be in the world.

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<sup>161</sup> In Serbian language terms human and man are used interchangeably and being a *man* means being a full human.



## **Father<sup>162</sup>**

*The Turks began their chase  
After Serbian families' heads  
To take away  
Their happiness and freedom.  
They hunt them through villages,  
Through villages and towns.  
They hunt them across the rivers,  
Across rivers and banks,  
Wherever the chase goes,  
Poor people die, suffer.  
The Turkish force is blinded by  
The Serbian people's deadly threat,  
So they want to remove  
Serbian heroes, their biggest fear.  
The Turkish force is blinded by  
The former Serbian glory,  
So they want to take off  
All the heroic Serbian heads.  
Nenadović fell bravely  
And Birčanin died with him.  
But Janko, Gagić Janko,  
He fled to the mountains.  
In vain the hunt is after him,  
Without rest and with no breaks,  
They can't find the mountain son  
anywhere,  
Janko Gagić is nowhere to be found.  
But when the Turks could not  
Find him in the mountains,  
They returned from the mountain gorges  
And the village of Boleč they enter,  
Looking for Janko's house,  
Looking for single mothers,  
Looking for unarmed youth,  
Looking for defenseless children,  
All 'brave' scaring the weak.*

*So they catch Janko's bird instead,  
His bird—his son,  
Falcon's eyas.  
And they take him on the royal road,  
So they can sever his head,  
The Turks lead the child to death,  
The road leads by the mountain.  
So when they were at the bridge  
Which goes over the river  
They paused for his father  
To show how they'll sever the son's head.  
And the executioner is raising his sword  
To sever the child's head,  
But a sudden voice was heard  
Gagić's voice from the mountain:  
Stop, the Turks, stop  
Do not sin!  
Don't touch the falcon's eyas.  
Here, take my head instead!  
And he came out of the bushes,  
So he said to his young son:  
Go son, go, my hope,  
Fly, my eyas, to the mountain!  
So when the holy song is sang  
And the holy uprise flows through  
the mountain,  
Remember your father,  
Who died for you and your freedom.  
Remember that he gave  
his head for you,  
So you can replace him  
In our bloody holy war!  
With those words, he put his head down.  
The sword flashed and he passed.  
While the father's eyas already,  
Flew to the mountains.*

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<sup>162</sup> "Podiže se divlja hajka, Protiv jednog srpskog roda, Da mu ne da da oseti, Šta je sreća i sloboda. Ide hajka preko sela, Preko sela i gradova. Ide hajka preko reka, Preko reka i bregova, Gde god stigne, gde god stane, Jadna raja gine, strada. Zaspila sila turska, Od rajine strašne pretnje, Pa se digla da ukloni, Srpske dike, svoje smetnje. Zaspila turska sila, Od negdašnje srpske slave, Pa se digla da poskida, Sve junačke srpske glave. Nenadović hrabri pade, I Birčanin s njim poginu. Ali Janko, Gagić Janko, On umače u planinu. Zalud hajka za njim juri, Bez odmora i bez stanka, Nigde nema gorskog sina, Nigde nema Gagić Janka. Al' kad hajka ne





Heroism is not only giving life to protect their offspring, but also teaching their Descendants to not to be afraid to be fully human. While I agree with Thomas King (2003) when he warned us about choosing the stories to share: “Why we tell our children that life is hard, when we could just as easily tell them that is sweet?” (p. 26), I believe it is important for us to know about the more difficult stories as well. I am not sharing the story of heroism to warn the next generation about the hardship in life, rather to advise them to follow their hearts and live fully.

Returning to the questions about (what, why, how, etc.) community, I recognize that the answers lie in my collocutors as knowledge holders, in their practice, in our relations, in all of our work, in all of our community. Thus, I search beyond Daniela’s “authentic” folklore, Ruth’s and Alexander’s “real” music and dances, Selena’s notion of “successful realization.” Because beyond the quality of our participation, our community will thrive on the wholeheartedness of our presence and our ability to leave our door wide open and invite in our neighbours.

I gather the teaching from this theme and share it forward:

Bigheartedly offer to build an open and  
inclusive community and teach holistically;  
Lean into vulnerability and live bravely;  
Take your neighbour’s hand and invite them  
to dance, in kolo.

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mogaše, U planinu da ga nađe, Ona manu gorske klance, Te u Boleč selo zađe, Pa Jankovu kuću traži, Traži žene samohrane, Traži nejač, bez oružja, Traži decu bez odbrane, I junačine nad nejači. Uhvati mu jednog ptića, Uhvati mu jednog sina, Sokolova sokolića. Pa ga vodi drumom carskim, Da bar njemu glavu skine, Turci dete na smrt vode, A drum vodi kraj planine. Pa kad beše na ćupriji, Što pokriva jednu reku, Zastadoše da za oca, Sokoliću glavu seku. I već dželat sablju diže, Da detetu glavu skine, Al’ se začu glas nenadni, Glas Gagića iz planine: Stan’te Turci, stan’te vuci, Ne grešite ruke svoje! Ne dirajte sokolića, Evo ruse glave moje! I izađe iz šipraga, Pa nejakom zbori sinu: Idi sine, idi nado, Idi ptiću u planinu! Pa kad sveta ora dođe, Te se poklič gorom vine, Ti se seti baba svoga, Što za tebe sada gine. Ti se seti da on za te, Dade rusu glavu svoju, Da ti njega zamenjuješ, U krvavom svetom boju! To izreče, glavu saže. Sablja sevnu a on minu. A sokolić dotle beše, Odleteo u planinu.” [my translation].



## Cultural Activities as a Necessity in Human Progression

My collocutors have shared their thoughts on the importance of traditional cultural practices as an investment in human wholeness.

There are two main reasons why the folkloric heritage from Balkans is specific and unique—firstly, our music and rhythm are not similar to any other culture’s music overtone and secondly, our circle or half-circle formation and chain dancing is by nature inclusive. (Nada)

When we transfer the knowledge with every word and every step, we give our perspective and our point of view, the knowledge is with every person who dances kolo. (Selena)

About Zurla music: Up until quite recently, it was played exclusively by Romani people and the music is directly derived from Turkish. So, the names of the tunes are Turkish, some of the dances are Turkish, but of course they are idiosyncratic from the villages. There are so many prejudices against the Romani people, and yet they are carrying tradition that doesn’t exist outside from them playing it. And it is required, necessary to pass that tradition, but unless Romani people do it there will be nobody else. (Ruth)

We have our rich culture that always stays in us and that many of us practice in music and dance... I see in the Balkans, not just with Roma, but with Serbians, Montenegrins, and Croatians that there’s a rich culture we’re tied to, and it’s kind of a way that acting is much stronger and prominent. (Benji)

I prefer to spend more time playing with Roma than any other cultural group. There was that knowledge that we shared and often we fully understood each other. No words necessary. That’s folklore. (Michael)

We would go to wedding and dance. Rusyn weddings used to be really cheerful and everyone would dance and everyone would sing. I remember listening to the bends playing their repertoire and everyone would sing every single song. And that is how I learned traditional Rusyn songs at the early age. And the dances too. (Mihajlo)

These kolos and the stories are connected to real people and real situations and traditions and I feel people should know about them as a larger package in order to understand how they work and what their value is in the world. (Alexander)

Bulgarians are now discovering Bulgarian traditional dance because of their personal needs to be connected with their roots, ancestry. (Daniela)

All of my collocutors spoke about their own experiences or what they have witnessed through their passionate and engaged contributions to the widespread cultural



engagements. They spoke about music and dance as artistic expressions of cultural presence and how those processes contributed to the resuscitation of humanity. In a similar tone, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) quoted one of her collocutors explaining the role of artistic activities in maintaining our humanity:

[M]usic and arts is one of the few things that human beings have that is universal and that is the place to start to bridge the gaps between us...It is perpetuation of the human race...We live in a society that dehumanizes you...You need to have the support system that makes you a human being again. Plaza is one of the few resources this community has for making this humanization process for our kids. (p. 101)

This dehumanizing process might not always be as horrendous as what we witnessed in wars and other conflicts, but nevertheless, any means of dehumanizing affects positive human progression. Generally, dehumanization is seen as depriving people of human qualities, personality, or dignity. It is this idea of human qualities that might be challenging, since often, the dominating cultures would claim the position and definition of what human qualities are. However, as previously discussed, I entered this research inspired by my belief in the primordial traditional cultural knowledge and my yearning to reclaim these seminal ways of knowing, and as such, acknowledge different ways of being in the world.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) reminded us that,

[o]ur stories say that all of the plants, *wiingaashk*, or sweetgrass, was the very first to grow on the earth, its fragrance a sweet memory of Skywoman's hand. Accordingly, it is honoured as one of the four sacred plants of my people. Breathe in its scent and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten. Our elders say that ceremonies are the way we "remember to remember," and so sweetgrass is a powerful ceremonial plant cherished by many indigenous nations. It is also used to make beautiful baskets. Both medicine and a relative, its value is both material and spiritual. (p. 5)

In a similar way, we carry the knowledge that leads by values. Our kolo, as a ceremony, reminds us to remember. As mentioned before, singing and dancing was everyday practice among people of the Balkans: Women sang by themselves or in groups, to keep in good spirits while doing repetitive tasks like spinning, weeding, milking, laundry, weaving, house cleaning; Men sang and played homemade instruments, such as frulas or gusle, while herding livestock or travelling to distant fields. They also sang and danced during weekly gatherings, usually after religious meetings, where the village



would congregate and all would get together. Music and dance were regular practice at all special occasions or ceremonies: for the agricultural cycles as plowing, planting, harvest; seasons—mid-winter, mid-summer; or milestones in a person's life, such as a Christening, rite of passage, marriage, childbirth, death; sometimes specific to women, or to men, soldiers, and shepherds. Typically, a village or a region would have a repertoire of ten to twenty dances used for these occasions. Dancing and music are much more than just entertainment. People danced traditional dances, kolos, in lieu of organized sports, theatre, social clubs, dating, or even law courts. In rural areas, it was the social order, the way to connect, as well as the means of expression.

My collocutors fully understood the importance of dance and other traditional cultural activities and its connection to the way we are now and the only way we continue to be. Ruth spoke about the importance of dance from her context: *"In our country America, we have lost dance tradition. Cutting off the extended family and being nuclear family. Capitalism does that to you. Because you need to buy more things."* As a high school teacher, Ruth shared her thoughts on systematic suppression of youth's natural instincts and progression, and with that, development into adults that might not be fully human:

There is a desire to move that people have. Look at the little kids—all they do is dance. They hear the music physically. It's the natural human need. It is a need. And it dawned on me that these poor [high school] kids didn't have the opportunity to dance. Adults who deal with high school kids are terribly afraid of their sexuality. That's the thing—they don't want them talking or dressing in a nice way, God forbid touching. Well, they definitely go a little crazy at the dances for sure, but if we created a different way of social normalized structured way where they are not isolated from the age groups, I believe it would be different. That's the other weird thing we do—we leave the kids at home. Of course, we have an epidemic of anxiety and depression—that's because everybody is isolated.

Naturally, youth yearn to trailblaze their own paths in life. They naturally want to explore and form their own identities, learn traditions with which they resonate, and find communities where they belong. However, if we offer support and love within the community that promotes the culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion they might not go far from us.

The consensus among my collocutors regarding the importance of cultural activities in the process of human progression, specifically folkloric dances, even further



strengthened my position. They all spoke from their perspective, which again, offered wider observation of this theme. Nada described specific qualities of kolo as a comprehensive and everlasting method of cultural inclusion. Selena demonstrated the significance of individual participation and the value that we all bring to each kolo and each other. Benji welcomed us in the depths of his being where he carries the culture, instead of in the land. Daniela helped people reclaim their traditions and reconnect to the humanness of their culture. Mihajlo and Alexander spoke about the traditions that shaped them as individuals, and how they in turn, are using that knowledge and passing it further.

The implication of kolo in ritualistic proceedings is evident in accepting ourselves through our culture and observing both as respected in comparison to the other cultures. Alexander's description of the bride he interviewed for his research depicts this process of situating self in the context of a larger culture or a community:

I am not just me, the bride, but I'm the same as every other bride who came before me as the others that I've seen in my generation who got married. And I think I want the next generation of brides to be like I was as well through doing some of the same movements, the same rituals, the same practices.

Another example is the Dancing for the Dead ritual. While versions diverge based on the region, many Balkan cultures still practice similar customs nowadays. While I never had the opportunity to attend in person, I watched many hours of video recordings of Ora d'e Pomana, custom practiced among Serbian Vlachs. Mesmerized by the magnificence of the ritual, I showed it to my daughters, who, quite versed in folkloric dances, recognized the music and steps, "But we dance this kolo at igrankas, and in [choreography] Vlaške.<sup>163</sup> We just danced it at Nina's babine<sup>164</sup>!" They were flabbergasted by the idea that the dance they associate joyful feelings with, is danced at wakes as well.

As Kimmerer (2013) described the sweetgrass as "both material and spiritual" (p. 5), our kolo is also both light-hearted and contemplative. In kolo, we rejoice and mourn, welcome and send off, dancing in a circle—a circle of life. In kolo, we pray for the souls

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<sup>163</sup> Performing Vlachs choreography at different occasions.

<sup>164</sup> The Serbian version of baby shower, a welcoming celebration for a newborn, scheduled forty days after the birth.



of the ones who passed and the ones that just arrived. In kolo we accept our ways and ourselves as human. Until the mid-20th century, not so long ago, the vast majority of people living in the Balkans lived in rural areas as peasants—tilled the soil and tended the animals. Most people lived in small villages within multi-generation family houses, often related to others in the village or neighbouring villages. Often, there were no stores and people made almost everything they needed from their own resources. People were poor in material goods, but rich in cultural life. Traditional cultural activities represented and served as a school, apothecary, and a court—engaged in these activities people learned, heeled, they were tried and forgiven. When they erred and deviated from a right path, they could reorient toward the strong cultural values. As an example of a cultural engagement that teaches hard lessons, I share a folk story about a father and his sons who diverted from the way their elders taught them to be—honest, humble, and respectful, and the dire consequences they suffered because of their choices.

### ***The Monk and Four Sinners***

*There once was a devoted monk, with a gray head and beard, who always prayed to God. As he was travelling by foot, the road took him near a church by a Christians grave yard. As he came close to the gate of the churchyard, he saw three horses, one red as blood, the other black as coal, and the third yellow as saffron, roaming around the graves and around the church.*

*But when they saw the monk, they started screaming and roaring, while foaming on their mouths like the earth was about to devour them. The monk, thinking what he would do, hid behind a tree. The horses came to one grave and began to beat the grave with their feet and roar and trumpet loudly. They roared until a middle-aged man came out of the grave, with his arms and legs crossed as he was buried when he died.*

*The horses started to jump around him and scream loudly, but they did not touch him, nor did he answer them, but everyone cried. The monk, fearing that the horses would harm the man, run toward them, and begged them by heaven and earth that should stop, and the horses stopped. Then the monk touched the man and the horses with his stick. As soon as he touched them, the dead came to life, and the horses turned into the people. The monk asked them,*

*“Who are you and what are you? One by one, confess to me, in secret or in front of everyone, and I’ll try to help you.”*

*Then the man said to the monk,*



*“Spiritual Father! These horses were my dear sons, and I killed all three of them one night when they slept. I killed all three of them with my own hand. I kept the secret and never told anyone, not even the priest at confession. I wanted to confess before I die, but the death was faster and I died before the priest arrived.”*

*“And what is it with you?” the monk asked the three sons.*

*“We did not want to listen to our parents, and did everything opposite and against their will. We did not respect them and did not repent.”*

*Then the monk took out of his book and the oil lamp, and first said to the three sons,*

*“Ask your father’s forgiveness,”*

*and to the father,*

*“Now repent of your sins,”*

*and as he did, he collected all four under the lamp and read them the forgiveness prayer. Then they kissed the monk’s hand, and while crying they embraced and kissed each other, they went to their graves, and the monk told the people to repent and not to leave this world without confession and forgiveness.<sup>165</sup>*

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<sup>165</sup> “Kaludjer i četiri griješnika.

Bio nekada nekakav bogougodni kaludjer, bijele brade i glave, koji se vazda Bogu moljaše. Putujući jednom notnjo nanese ga put pokraj jedne crkve dje se hrišćani kopaju. Kada dodje pred vrata od avlije crkvene ugleda tri konja, jednoga crljena kao krv, drugoga crnoga kao ugali, a trećeg žuta kao čafran, dje obigravaju tamoamo okolo grobova i okolo crkve. Ali kad vidjaše kaludjera, ne znade im se strva kako da ih zemlja proždrije. Kaludjer pošto vidje šta bi, ukloni se malo za jedno drvo, dok evo ti opet ona ista tri konja, dodjoše na jedan grob i nad njim stadoše nogama tući i u svu vrisku drijeti se dok evo ti izadje iz groba jedan čoek sredoviječan, no gromoradna stasa, onako prekrištenijeh ruka i noga kao što su ga kad je umro u grob vrgli. Konji okolo njega jednako skakahu i vrištijahu, ma ga ne doticahu, niti on njima što odgovaraše no sve plakaše. Kaludjer bojeći se da konji što ne učine čoeku pritrči k njima iznenada, i zakle ih nebom i zemljom da svaki stane na svome mjestu, te konji stadoše. Onda kaludjer tače štapom najpridje čoeka, pa konje redom. Tek što kojega taknu, mrtvi oživlje a konji se u ljude provrgoše; pa ih upita: “Koji ste i što ste vi? Jedan po jedan ispovjedite mi se na tajno ili pred svijema, ako mogoh da vam pomognem.” Onda reče oni čoek: “Oče duhovni! Ovo su bili moji najstretniji sinovi, i ja sam sva tri jednu večer kada su spavali zaklao svojom rukom, pa sam tajao i nikada nikomu kazao, pa ni popu na ispovjesti, nego sam mislio ispovidjeti pri smrti, ali me ugrabi prije no pop prispije.” “A vama šta je?” upita kaludjer ona tri sina. “Mi roditelja svojijeh nijesmo šćeli slušati, nego protiv njihove volje sve drukčije radili a ne pokajali se.” Tada kaludjer izvadi iz torbice pertailj i trebnik, pa najpridje reče onoj trojici: “Pitajte ocu svojemu proštenje,” a ocu: “sada ti pokaj se od grijehova;” te kako učiniše, pa potkupi svu četvoricu pod petrailj i očita im oproštenu molitvu. Potom oni poljubiše kaludjera u ruku i pošto se izmedju sebe izgriše i izljubiše suze roneći otidoše svaki u svoj grob, a kaludjer svojim putem kazujući narodu da se kaje i da ne bi koji bez ispovesti pošao sa ovoga svijeta.” [my translation] (Stefanović Karadžić, 2017, p. 130)



While unusually sad, this story carries many important messages. It presents us with the moral dilemma of family relations, justice, taking life, guilt, victims, offenders, and teaches us that rarely one person can claim an absolute moral position, and often responsibility and accountability is shared among many. In the story, we see that even parents, who in traditional folkloric literature are typically portrayed as wise and calm, can make morbid mistakes such as murdering their children. However, instead of taking the role as innocent victims, the sons shared the responsibility and by forgiving the gravest sinful act, tried to ease their father's eternal guilt. Through their acts they demonstrate love, benevolence, and respect. I share this story not to warn my readers of an eternal damnation, rather to invite you to generously and bravely extend empathy and allow mistakes as part of being human. Nepo (2020) advised,

Perhaps the most enduring contribution for any of us is to mend the very thing we have brutalized. Perhaps the greatest justice is for the inhuman in us to become human again, until we can see what we have done with the softer eyes we were born with. (p. 30)

With that, I gather the teaching from this theme and share it forward:

Engage in your culture's activities;  
Follow the trail of your Ancestors, always  
keeping in mind that the "task of the  
wayfarer, however, is not to act out a script  
received from predecessors but literally to  
negotiate a path through the world." (Ingold,  
2013, p. 305);  
Never forget that our Ancestors have erred  
as all humans do, thus judge restoratively  
and forgive to be able to rebuild the  
wholeness of humanness.

## **Acknowledging Interconnectedness**

While they spoke with different levels of intensity, my collocutors offered their view on interconnectedness:





When I go back to my village in Serbia and tell them that the Chinese man lead Moravac in Serbian church, nobody will believe me! (Nada)

At the school for vocational studies and the early childhood education program. The idea was to establish a department for folk dance, for early childhood educators to be specialising in teaching folkloric dances, thus they will be trained to pass on our traditional dances. They would teach the preschool children before they begin grade one. (Selena)

In real, authentic folklore there is a high chance for change. The music is changing, because, well, nothing stays the same. If you listen the people when they play in the 1920s it's not the same as the way people play now. And the way people play now is still authentic. In the last 10–20 years, in many areas of Greece, the music is diluted to the point that cannot be called traditional anymore. (Ruth)

Since we are Romani, we came from India and we passed through the Middle East, we passed through Turkey and we collected all these multi-century influences. There are a lot of Turkish elements in Greek music, there are a lot of elements of Turkish music in Balkans in general, the scales we use. And it is interesting to see how when we are there, in Balkans, we can travel a few kilometers and the music will be so much different, but would still have some similar elements. So, when we listen to Albanians, we recognize our music. (Benji)

I've been to the Balkans many times and I've seen folklore in action. How people relate to it, what settings it occurs, what power it has in a community, where it comes from how dance affects people. I've seen it through the years and I've seen it change through the years. All that experience comes as a general knowledge of Balkans. (Michael)

People used to dance certain dances in certain situations—there were dances for celebrating harvest, coming of age, certain holidays, rituals, and kids were observing. The following year they observed again, until a few years later, where they would be ready to join. Naturally, children would absorb the knowledge instead of receiving directives how to do steps mechanically. (Mihajlo)

There was this curiosity for me of figuring out how another group's cultural brain ticks. Asking "what are their experiences", not in a logical or rational way, but in a sense of trying to understand the organic groove that a whole group of people created over generations. To hear them say "there's some music that we have" and "these are the kinds of movements or bodily expressions that we think match this music the best" or "these are the most enjoyable moves for this music." (Alexander)

When they wear costumes, they think of this awareness as being transported into a different reality and they love it, and they developed this kind of attitude I have toward the costume. (Daniela)



Some of my collocutors have experienced or witnessed racism, discriminations, and nationalism which put them in a position to speak on a different level. Some spoke with tears in their eyes, some with bitter smiles. I listened often with a lump in my throat.

It's so sad how [Kosovo] is under Albanian control now, and for my dad and my family who grew up there and is actually the land that should be their home, but they don't really care whether it belongs to Serbia or Albania, because it's not about the government. And no matter what, the Roma are always going to be the most ignored subset of the culture, whether it's Serbians or Albanians. For sure, my family has always had an easier time communicating with Serbians, and my dad has especially had a hard time growing up with Albanians because of racism.

I listened to Benji, ashamed for wanting Kosovo to be Serbian again. "Serbian" only. I was not thinking about Benji's dad, or any other minority. I reflect on that, and I extend my meaning-making process as I share the following folk song.

### ***'Ajde Jana***

Through his teaching of Eurythmy, Steiner (1977) investigated if "music really is the flow of the melody, and if it is the melody in particular which should be expressed in the gestures of [dance]..., what then is music as such...meant to express?" (p. 84). Pondering about this, I look at one of my favourites and beloved Serbian song and kolo lyrics:

C'mon Jana, let's dance the kolo!  
C'mon Jana, c'mon honey, let's dance the kolo,  
C'mon Jana, c'mon honey, let's dance the kolo!

C'mon Jana, let's sell the horse!  
C'mon Jana, c'mon honey, let's sell the horse,  
C'mon Jana, c'mon honey, let's sell the horse!

For to sell it, just to dance!  
For to sell it, Jana honey, just to dance,  
For to sell it, Jana honey, just to dance!

C'mon Jana, let's sell the house!  
C'mon Jana, c'mon honey, let's sell the house,  
C'mon Jana, let's dance the kolo!



For to sell it, just to dance!  
For to sell it, Jana honey, just to dance,  
For to sell it, Jana honey, just to dance!<sup>166</sup>

I am aware that this is one of the most popular Serbian folkloric songs, and it might be seen as a cliché, because everybody knows it and everybody claims it as theirs. Only since 1960, it was recorded by more than 50 artists in Yugoslavia, Serbia, Germany, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Sweden, England, Italy, Poland, Canada, USA, and more, and performed numerous times in different arrangements such as a pop, hard-rock, or even cappella style variations. Because of its lyrics, it is also discussed and altered more than other folk songs. Nevertheless, the Serbian worldview recorded in these lyrics comes to surface. We all grew up listening to similar songs, and most of us do not listen to the words attentively. Somehow desensitized, we do not hear the true meaning of the song.

I have selected the song “Ajde Jano” very early in the writing process. While the author and the exact time of the song’s origin are unknown, it is believed the song originated at the town of Kosovska Mitrovica in the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija more than 300 years ago, which is another reason why this is a very special song for me. Many Serbs still recognize Kosovo as our land and we find it difficult, to say the least, to part with it. Kosovo is our pride and our wound. It is something that we cannot begin to discuss, yet we cannot stop talking about it. However, I was humbled by

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<sup>166</sup> “Ajde Jano, kolo da igramo!

‘Ajde Jano, ‘ajde dušo kolo da igramo,

‘Ajde Jano, ‘ajde dušo kolo da igramo!

‘Ajde Jano, konja da prodamo!

‘Ajde Jano, ‘ajde dušo, konja da prodamo

‘Ajde Jano, ‘ajde dušo, konja da prodamo!

Da prodamo, samo da igramo!

Da prodamo, Jano dušo, samo da igramo,

Da prodamo, Jano dušo, samo da igramo!

‘Ajde Jano, kuću da prodamo!

‘Ajde Jano, ‘ajde dušo, kuću da prodamo,

Ajde Jano, ‘ajde dušo, kuću da prodamo!

Da prodamo, samo da igramo!

Da prodamo, Jano dušo, samo da igramo,

Da prodamo, Jano dušo, samo da igramo!” [my translation].



the words of young Benji whose father fled war-torn Kosovo when he elucidated that his family “doesn’t really care that much about it belonging to Serbia or Albania, because it’s not about the government.” But what is it about? Deeper in our conversation, Benji explained that he does not “feel a national tie to Kosovo.” On the other hand, he feels “fully immersed in Roma culture, and especially through the music, and ...—not through the land.” I commend him for his thoughts, but am still unclear why this song makes me cry every time I hear it? What is so special about it? Why does it feel like it contains a whole culture in it?

The narrator, potentially Jana’s husband, attempts to persuade her to sell everything they own—a horse and a house, so they can dance. Dancing in kolo is an allegory of a spiritual journey *and* living a high life. At first glance, the two objectives appear self-contradicting—the extravagance coupled with overindulgence of a high life typically does not include the spiritual practice of a higher level of thinking, ethical and sustainable values, meaning, and hope. It is important to note that at the time of the origin of the song, only the privileged upper-class citizens would have been able to afford such extravagant ceremonies and celebrations while the common people and peasants struggled in relative poverty, a notion that can probably be applied nowadays as well. So, who are Jana and her partner? And why are they trying to sell everything they own just so they could celebrate and dance? It is difficult to imagine circumstances for such direct suggestive recklessness and careless irresponsibility, not often seen in Serbian folklore. Or any other culture in the region. Life was, and still is not easy, and it takes a lot of hard work to provide a good life for your family. So why would anybody sacrifice all earthly possessions for a night out? Going further, why would Serbian people continue to sing this song and through every performance share its message? Why would neighbouring cultures adopt the song and continue to perform it as their own, and through every performance, share its message? Without suggesting the precise answer, I offer the probable explanation. It might be that the allegorical lyrics represent the desire to live with music and dance, with singing and *ćef*, with happiness and love, at all costs, even if we have to sacrifice a house and a horse. It might be that through the simplicity of the music, and song, and the act of holding hands in kolo we yearn to be relocated to a place (Benson, 2001) without worries—without greed—without hate. It might be that *they* drag us into something in which we do not want to be, but we are expected not to question. Hall (1990) proposed that,



Cultural identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (p. 225)

During our conversation, Benji and I discussed the turbulent, often confusing Balkan history, difficult to remember all historical conflicts. We spoke about focusing on the similarity in Balkan music and dances, without specifying the exact place of origin for every song. Benji added:

Over there, people are looking over the border at a neighbouring country or a region and the music and kolos look completely different to them. But for us, from here in North America, looking at the Balkans, we see it as the same music with variations. There, people focus on differences.

Even though we sing and dance "Ajde Jano" and we know the Serbian gray heads' saying, "because life is one and should we only be alive and healthy, everything else will come"<sup>167</sup>, we still focus on stories that taught us that Kosovo is *ours*, and as such we get to *own* the land. By choosing to discuss one of the most emotional conflicts, for me personally and in general for Serbian people, I acknowledge its complexity. I see all sides wave their arms high in the air with their usufructuary rights on the land, and I wonder if we forget the songs. I remind myself with Mitákuye Oyás'inj, *we are all related*, the Lakota phrase (Cajete, 1994, Kelly, 2012). Translated to Serbian, it sounds as *we are all in Rod*<sup>168</sup>—Rod the Creator of our Universe based on the Ancient Serbian/Slavic faith. In the religious context, I understand the phrase as *God is One*. In scientific context, I read it as the *science of oneness* (Hollick, 2006) "that is imbued with spirit and life, beauty and love; and a worldview that will enable us to live in harmony with each other and the planet" (p. 21).

During our conversation, Mihajlo shared how he, and many before him, learned traditional cultural ways by observing adults: "Naturally, children would absorb the knowledge instead of receiving directives on how to do steps mechanically." According to Jaques-Dalcroze (1921),

one of the most important factors in musical education is the training and development of the sense of Rhythm. There is little doubt that Rhythm is

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<sup>167</sup> "Јер један је живот и само да смо ми живи и здрави, свега ће да буде." [my translation]

<sup>168</sup> "Сви смо у Роду." [my translation].



the earliest aspect of music which appeals to children. It is, through the whole of our lives, the pulse by which the vitality of music can most readily be measured (p. v).

Steiner (1977) argued that “in eurythmy music is made visible; and one must have a sense for the place in man’s being where music has its true source if its fundamental nature is to be made visible” (p. 9). With the direct connection to one’s being, it is critical what songs, dances, and stories in general we share.

For once the story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the wind. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. (King, 2003, p. 10)

So why not choose to tell the stories that will connect us? Such as Nada’s story about the Chinese man leading and teaching Serbs their national kolo Moravac; Or Benji’s story about recognizing Serbian tones in Albanian songs; Or Alexander’s story about him as a teenager who was curious to learn how another group’s cultural brain ticks.

### ***Užička Kajda***

There is an old, almost ancient singing practice in Serbia called Užička Kajda. Unfortunately, it is not commonly practiced nowadays, even in rural areas, and is being preserved only by a group of enthusiasts who are struggling to keep it from complete extinction. That vocal tradition from the Užice region in central Serbia is considered the most interesting of local musical customs. It is performed as one-voiced and two-voiced singing in two distinct styles: the older one—singing aloud and the newer one—singing on bass.

It is typical for this type of singing to sing different lyrics with a smaller number of melodies. Melodies represent a type of pattern, called kajda. Two or more singers take part in singing these songs. The two voices are close to the one voice and only occasionally would one singer add a secondary consonance as an accompanying voice in an unanimously sung song. In this vocal tradition, the text has the most important role. The only task of the melody—kajde, is to enable the text to be performed, that is, to come to life. As a result, melodies are much less susceptible to change than lyrics.

According to ethnomusicologists in Serbia, Užička Kajda is the oldest style of singing in Europe. They claim that the evident Ancient Serbian/Slavic elements in these songs act as the magic, and paint the pictures of totems from distant pre-Christian times,



from the times of the oldest human communities. The local call this singing the one that can “shift the mountains.” As in ancient times, the Užička Kajda is performed always by two singers—two men, two women, less often a husband and wife, but very often two brothers or two sisters.

Coincidentally, during my research, I listened to Gabriel George perform the “Chief Dan George Prayer” song. Instantly, albeit by my amateur ear, I recognized a singing style similar to the Šaković and Raketić duet’s performance of “I will sing through the village once more”<sup>169</sup> song. See the links below to listen to the YouTube recordings:

- [Chief Dan George Prayer Song performed by his grandson Gabriel George](#) (George, 2015)
- [Još ću Jednom Propjevat' Kroz Selo performed by Raketić & Šaković](#) (Raketić & Šaković, 2019)

Am I mistaken to notice that they sing in a similar tone even though they are situated many thousands of kilometers apart? Am I mistaken to notice that the music and dances sound almost the same as the others in the region? Am I mistaken to notice the likenesses in languages that people speak? I chose to focus on similarities and not on differences.

Living on the Canadian west coast for many years, I became attuned to its qualities and familiar with some epistemological concepts specific to this land and its peoples. I was introduced to these concepts on this continent, and never connected them to any other geographical region. However, during my research journey, I discovered that similar concepts extend to the Serbian region, geographically far from here. In the *Serbian mythology of beliefs, customs, and rituals* book, (Petrović, 2004) ancient Serbian/Slavic mythological deities and relations to nature are expressed in a circle or a wheel, noting sky as Upper World and earth as Lower World, cardinal directions, seasons, time of the day, spirits and more (see Figure 41). Particularly interesting and related to the Medicine Wheel I learned about on this continent are the following relations:

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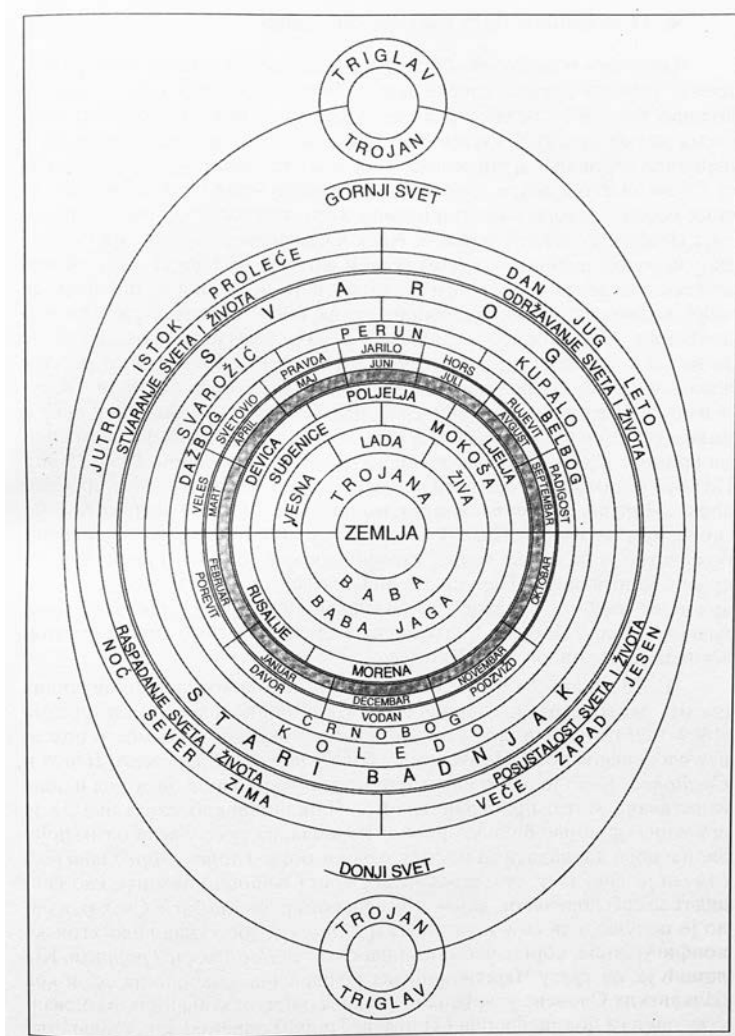
<sup>169</sup> “Još ћu једном пропјевати кроз село.” [my translation].



Morning~ East~ Spring  
 Afternoon~ South~ Summer  
 Evening~ West~ Autumn  
 Night~ North~ Winter

**Figure 41**

*Reprinted from Petrović, 2004, p. 269. Included with permission*



Сл. 35. Схема српских и словенских божанства, према јужнословенском материјалу.

With that, I gather the teaching from this theme and share it forward:

We are all related (Cajete, 1994, Kelly,  
 2012);



Open your mind, open your heart, open  
your kolo and rejoice.

## Allowing Diversity and Continual Change

Passionately engaged in traditional cultural practices, my collocutors contributed their observations that collectively informed the last emergent theme which focuses on diversity among cultures and our acceptance of continual change. This is what they said:

What we see in kolos nowadays is less and less smerno<sup>170</sup>—the steps are larger and the music is faster. Everybody runs and jumps high and while that is attractive for the audience, that is not how we were made to dance. (Nada)

When we are on stage we act. We become someone else. We show Serbian folk costumes on the stage. As part of the performance. That's why they stop being folk-wardrobe and become costumes. (Selena)

You can tell that the dance that is done all over the place is stemming from the Albanian community, from the Greek Macedonian, because there are differences. And if you are someone who is far enough removed to see all that stuff, you can see there is a continuum—there is no border. (Ruth)

It's also a way for me stay in line with my culture and to identify as a Rom. It's also a sense of pride for me because we look around the world and we see these Balkan countries and a lot of the times the Romani musicians are the top guys, you know? (Benji)

As a Jew coming from New York, there was no tradition that felt like mine and in some ways, that's amazing, because I have the world's music to choose from. I was exposed to a lot of international dancing and music from all around the world, but I just gravitated to this... Balkan chose me. (Michael)

We hold hands dancing in kolo in a society in which that is not always encouraged. But it is where we come from—that's what we know—to hold each other. In kolo we touch, we hold other human being and we connect on that level too. (Mihajlo)

There's this way which in the Balkans, it's all about having the right stimuli: the music, the space to dance, the food, the drink, the atmosphere, the people. I think the way that it becomes emotionalized is through the body and it comes to feel very natural for people and because of that so it's never questioned. (Alexander)

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<sup>170</sup> In Serbian for humble.



This new knowledge changes us. We hear things differently, our body feels things differently, we understand the community differently, we enjoy the life differently—so it is an absolute change in one’s life. (Daniela)

Once again, my collocutors illustrated their diverse positions on the last theme of diversity and continual change. Due to their intimate engagement with traditional cultural practices, some of them were rather wary of changes they witnessed in folkloric performance nowadays, but those comments were mainly directed toward the general preservation of national heritage and not about the cultural-educational approach to cultural activities in which I am interested. However, even though my focus is how cultural activities affect the development of a whole person, I fully acknowledge and appreciate the tremendous work that goes into every kolo performed privately and especially publicly. To showcase the magnitude of the work is needed for each performance, the Serbian actor Slaven Došlo presented Serbian National Ensemble Kolo’s work, listing the folkloric dance terms:

Kolo, folklore, folklorists, weaving, apparent rhythm, musical phrase, dance phrase, dance pattern, dance style, metanastatic movements, mise-en-scène, promenade, lines, open kolo, closed kolo, syncopation, triple-step, step, double-step, roar, rumble, command kolo, interweaving, plot, cross step, standard dance, traditional dance, moderate stylization, bounce step, rhythmic pattern, scheme, dance form, choreographic image, labanotation, choreography of folk dance, ethnochoreology, kinetogram, basic and variant step pattern, polykinetics. And you thought we were just playing! (Kolo, 2020)

Going deeper into this emergent theme, I observe a particularly interesting tradition dating from ancient times, which has been preserved to this day.

### ***Koledari***

Koledari present the members of different mask processions of Balkans and other Slavic peoples, commonly celebrated during the winter periods. While the basics of this tradition appear similar, there are many terms for these rituals, such as Округтники, Калядойшчыки, Колядобщики, Kolędnicy, Obchůzky, Koledníci, Kurenti, Bušari, Zvončari, Koledari, Џаламари based on the location of Balkans and other Slavic cultures. The prevalent term “koledo” akin to kolo, meaning circle, cycle, turn, etc. The same term was used to name the days of celebration during winter time, to describe the songs that are sung on these occasions, as well as certain objects used in the rituals. That particular term can be found in the earliest written sources, and is interesting to



note that these scriptures frequently describe the prohibition of Koledari rituals. However, since people found value in these traditions, these prohibitions were never fully enforced. It is unclear why the Koledari rituals were prohibited at all, but it is important that this living tradition is still practiced nowadays in some regions.

The processions were mostly carried out by unmarried men, led by an elder man, a gray head. The men came from the local community, they would organize into groups, and proceed to visit houses one by one. The ceremony takes place in winter during the time when the nature sleeps, quietly waiting for the new cycle to begin. The ceremonies mark the period that begins with the winter solstice and concludes with the spring equinox. This period between the seasons was traditionally observed as a state of uncertainty. For that reason, the masks are the essential part of this tradition. Masks allow its wearers (Koledari) to step out of regular social norms and take on a new, at least temporary, identity. While the people could change identities, the masks always remained the same, establishing a human connection with the nature and the timeless existence on the land and in the world.

The oldest man is typically masked as a “grandfather,” and he assumes the role of a mediator between the Koledari group and the hosts of the homes they would visit. He also has a companion, a “grandmother” or a “bride,” a mask always worn by a man. These two masks represent the Ancestors and the present-day connection with them. The second group of Koledari masks traditionally depict animals such as horses, bears, wolfs, storks, or a distinctively fascinating mask ‘turica’ (ure, urica, urus). The existence of this particular mask additionally dates this ceremony, because turica or European wild ox, aurochs become extinct in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century. All of the animals play the roles of bearers of prosperity and fertility. The last group are masks that are the combination of animal and human forms. This type of masking is common among most, if not all cultures of the Balkans and the rest of Slavic nations. The masks are typically made of wood and different type of squash, painted and decorated with horns. Masked Koledari also carry decorated sticks and wear a variety of animal skins, ornamented with bells. As they would proceed through the village, they produce plenty of noise announcing their arrival.

Koledari are sometimes accompanied by unmasked participants as well, usually singers or bagpipers. They would sing and perform music accompanying the masked



Koledari. Approaching each home, first would seek approval to enter and upon receiving it, they would begin the ceremony. Typically, they would play games, sing, or dance in kolo, depending on the traditions of the region and the culture. They would entertain the hosts with music, songs, dances, and performances portraying their Ancestors or animals from their surroundings. Underneath the masks and stepping out of mundane, they would bless the households bringing the much-needed hope for abundance and fertility. After they bless the house and its inhabitants, the hosts would generously reward Koledari, offering their food and other goods. Koledari continue their parade until they would visit all households in their village. Upon completion, they would retreat to the leader's house to enjoy the gifts they have received.

The ritual of gifting Koledari as payment for the performed services is particularly interesting and it speaks of the habitual generosity of the regional cultures. This need to give and share their possessions is strongly displayed in Serbian culture. For instance, during our conversation, Michael talked about his experience of Serbian hospitality:

The first thing as a traveller I experienced of a culture, was this phenomenal Serbian hospitality: Come to my house, my house is your house. Whatever they do they are willing to share. Other places in the world where I travelled you can feel the barriers, but not in Balkans. Serbians always welcome you and say have some šljivovica<sup>171</sup>, have this, have that.

One of the values that Serbian people pass generationally is this idea that one's good fortune might reverse if they do not learn how to be generous. An example of this teaching is in the story of an unfortunate fate that befell the priest.

### ***The Priest Drowned for not Giving his Hand***

*Five or six peasants and one priest boarded a dinghy to cross to the other side of a river. Suddenly a strong wind blew which caused a dinghy to flip. Luckily, everyone knew how to swim, except the priest. As they begin to sink under water, each of them grabbed the dinghy and they all managed to swim to the other side, except the priest who drowned. When they returned home, they went to share the tragic news with the priest's wife<sup>172</sup>.*

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<sup>171</sup> In Serbian for plum brandy.

<sup>172</sup> The Serbian Christian Orthodox priests are allowed and typically are married.



*They told her everything as it happened, how the priest drowned for no reason. She began to sob and wail loudly and asked them,*

*“How did he drown?”*

*They answered,*

*“When the dinghy flipped, and we all fell into the water, we all shouted, ‘Give us your hand, priest! Give us your hand!’ He could have easily given us his hand if he wanted, but he didn’t and so he drowned.”*

*“I know you did well, good people!”*

*said the priest’s wife,*

*“But you should have shouted at him, ‘Take our hand priest! You’re going to drown!’ because he only learned to take and not to give.”<sup>173</sup>*

This short folk anecdote teaches us that the good fortune is always changeable and nobody is immune to that change—not even well-respected priests. One of the most important values in Serbian culture is to be generous and share good fortune with family and friends and even strangers. Putnik-namernik or the intentional traveller is almost a mythical being and is mentioned in many folk stories and fairy tales. If a traveller or a guest come to one’s door, they will always be welcomed in and offered the wine from the best harvest, the oldest brandy, and the most delicious food. There is a belief that if someone does not let a guest (traveller) into the house, they will experience misfortune. Connected is also an old Serbian proverb that my Mama always recited to me when I fussed about my breakfast—according to my Mama, the most important meal of the day: “Eat your breakfast alone, share your lunch with a friend, and give your dinner to the enemy.” While I understood my Mama’s message about the importance of breakfast, as a child I was always puzzled with the Serbian ability to do the math—out of a whole food

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<sup>173</sup> “Утопио се поп што није руку дао

Укрцају се у један чун пет-шест простака и један поп да се превезу преко једне реке док на један мах дуне жесток ветар и изврне се чун те сви у воду. По срећи, сви су знали пливати до самога попа; док се почну топити, сваки од њих ухвати се за чун и тако препливају на другу страну. Кад се врате кући, кажу попадији све како је било, и да се поп без памети и без потребе утопио. Стане у сав глас попадија кукати као коме је невоља, па их запита: „Како се утопи?“ А они јој одговоре: „Кад се изврну чун, и ми сви у воду падосмо, сви једногрлце завикасмо: „Дај, попе, руку! Дај, попе, руку!“ И он могаше ласно дати тек да хоћаше, ма не даде и тако се утопи. „Знам ја, кукава кукавица,“ рече попадија „да је тако, ма, да сте му завикали: „На, попе, руку!“ хоћаше скапулати, јер је вазда (тешко мене!) научио узимати а не давати.“ [my translation] (Stefanovic Karadžić, 2009, p. 231)



portion you rationed for a full day, you are expected to give half away! As we would colloquially (and satirically) say—only in Serbia.

While many of the teachings and ceremonies, such as Koledari, are recorded in the Balkans and other Slavic cultures, the basic elements of connecting humans to the nature in which they are situated are not unique to this region and are found in many more cultures around the world. A typical Serbian Koledari song would include the following lyrics:

Koledari tell me that in kolo all men are revelers.  
Old books tell me that in kolo everyone is carefree.  
Old men tell me that in kolo one can judge well.  
Old women tell me that in kolo all are scoundrels.  
Young wives tell me that nerds are afraid of kolo.<sup>174</sup>

While most of the neighbouring cultures practice similar traditions, it is important to note that each region, even different villages within the same region would have distinct needs and therefore rituals. As aforementioned, the cultural activities present a way for humans to communicate with each other and with the nature in which they are situated. Through the ceremonial procedures, our Ancestors have demonstrated their understanding of the importance to be in constant harmony with nature and each other. While some of the cultural practices have remained the same such as Užička Kajda or singing aloud, over the years we have noticed sometimes slow albeit constant change in the rituals, songs, and dances. These changes in practice are evidence that our Ancestors have remained connected with their surroundings and have updated their “communications” based on the current needs. For example, when the Ottoman Empire occupied Serbian territories, they would forbid cultural activities, including music and dancing. Serbian people, however, found a way to dance unnoticed and without music, such as Nemo kolo (Deaf or No Music Kolo). One of the reasons for the “deafness” of these kolos is hiding of all traditional Serbian ceremonies and rituals from Turkish

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<sup>174</sup> “Meni kažu Koledari da s' u kolu svi bečari.  
Meni kažu stare knjige da s' u kolu sve nebrige.  
Meni kažu stari ljudi da s' u kolu dobro sudi.  
Meni kažu stare babe da s' u kolu sve barabe.  
Meni kažu mlade snaše da se kola šuše plaše.” [my translation].



aggressors, which was the only way to continue cultural practice without being killed. The continual reassessment and the required change are a sign of a healthy community.

Unfortunately, in the last one or two centuries, most of the world's cultures have experienced a disconnect with nature and its own people, due to the rapid technological changes, increased migration, growth in population, etc. Balkan cultures have experienced the same fate. Having survived many civil wars and conflicts, two world wars, pandemics and other diseases, natural disasters, economic catastrophes, the Balkan cultures did not manage to recover from the misfortunes and over time experienced a disconnect with nature, its people, and each other.

By re-acknowledging our traditions and our roots, we seek to re-awaken what the human spirit can do. Armed with the knowledge of our Ancestors that we disregarded in the last hundred or two hundred years, coupled with the new knowledge that science and technology taught us, we will be able to confidently face the new day. The knowledge from the traditional cultural practices our Ancestors gathered and preserved in the spirit we now carry in ourselves. That is the same spirit that helped us overcome hardship and survive the impossible. We know how to carry it; we just have to learn how to retrieve it and use it as a medicine we need for healing.

### ***Jasna (Again)***

*My nephew Zoran, Jasna's baby brother, married a Croatian woman. The family kept that information from Jasna. They were afraid for her, for him, for themselves also. Finally, my sister Nada found the courage to tell her. Jasna was furious. She phoned Zoran and raged over the phone, "...nearly gave my life...", "...wronged us...", "ancestral land..." Zoran was calm. He continuously repeated, "...but I am not you...". Over time, Jasna calmed down. She even managed to accept Andrea, Zoran's Croatian wife. Jasna also learned that everything in life has meaning. Especially her baby brother's choice for a wife. She now refers to Andrea as the medicine to help her heal. A balm that anoints the wounds. With Andrea in her life, Jasna learned how to begin to imagine forgiveness. Not to forgive, it is too soon for that, but to imagine is possible.*

With that, I gather the teaching from this theme and share it forward:

People are just humans and there is no  
perfect way of being in the world.  
Be tolerant and give. Generously.



## Kolo is the Beginning and the End, Kolo is the Past and the Future

As I have started my pilgrimage, I selected one guiding research question to lead my way:

*How do cultural activities, specifically folkloric dance, advance holistic learning and influence the development of the whole person?*

While my journey was arduous at times and some of my discoveries were unanticipated, throughout the good and not so good stages I managed to re-centre myself back to this important guiding question. Now, before I offer a simple answer to this multifaceted question, I need to remind us of what inspired me to ask this question: I have centred this study on a recognition of different ways of being human, searching for ways to treat the environmental, cultural, social, and specifically educational crises, distresses and disease of our time. As my friend would say, we are all now turning back to our roots, because we all want to be healthier! I hear Wagamese's (2011) voice loud and clear,

I've tried to integrate everything those elders taught me into a body of work that gets bigger each year. As often as I can, I get up in front of people and use the ancient tools. I connect to that *impossible blue that lives within me*, that area of both fullness and emptiness, and then I speak. [emphasis added] (p. 111)

I too, try to integrate everything I learned and offer it forward. I too, connect to the moving spirit, my *impossible blue*, that lives within me and helps me reach into the depths of the acquired knowledge and tell my story.

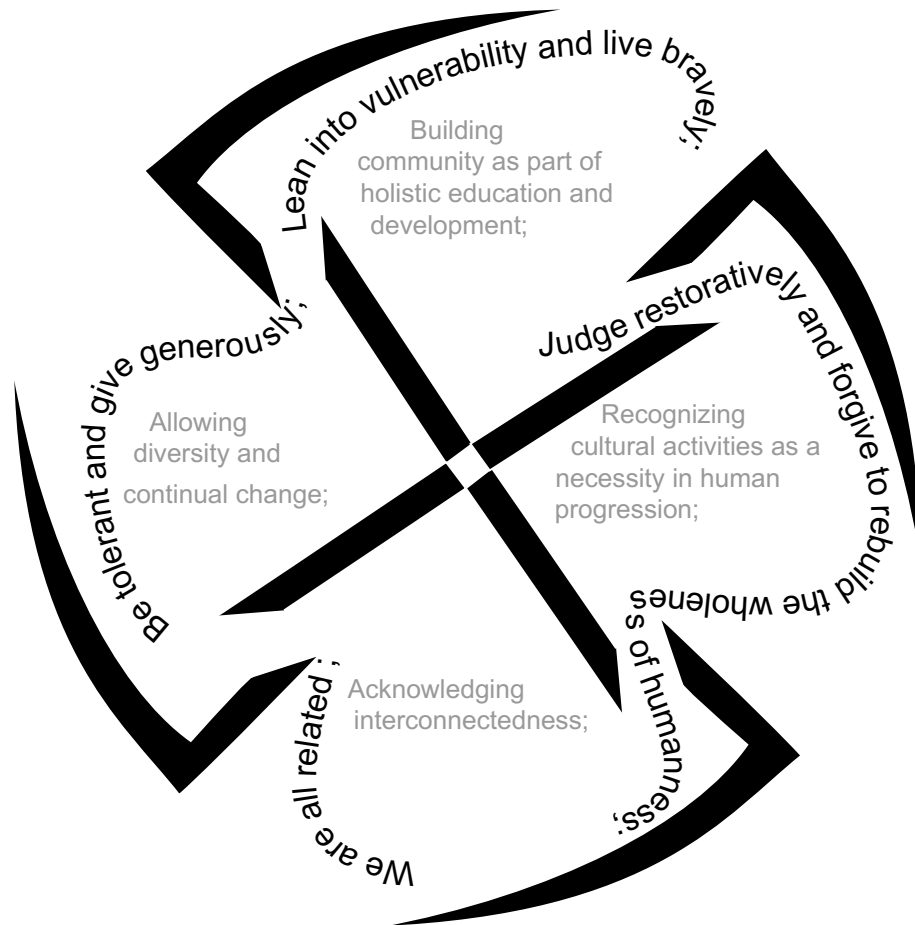
As my (almost) final teaching, I offer that building community that support holistic development of its people, recognizing cultural activities as a necessity in human progression, acknowledging interconnectedness, and finally, allowing diversity among us, is the only way to begin our healing processes. One last time, I offer kolovrat as a graphical presentation of these interconnected teachings (see Figure 42).





**Figure 42**

*Emerging Themes and Final Teachings Kolovrat*



In a way, even more important, earlier in this dissertation, I asked the question, why do we dance? After many years of research and reflection I offer my teaching: We dance to be part of the community, to develop one's identity, to make mistakes and fall only to be picked up by the others in kolo, to learn and practice altruistic principles, to experience the state of being a fuller human.

When we dance, we are present. We are present in the moment and in the movement. We exist simultaneously in the past and the future. We exist for ourselves and others. We see ourselves moving from before to after, from one pose to another, from the beginning to the end. Our existence lasts the length of kolo. We belong in kolo, and we are kolo. Kolo is the beginning and the end, it is a cycle that revitalizes itself and



the power that strengthens its parts. Our separate worlds do not exist. We only live in our movements. When the music stops, our movement dies, and with it, we die too.

While dancing, we die a small death with every kolo. We are born when the movement starts, and we die with the last moments of its existence. We start anticipative, and we die, gratified with the opportunity of a lived experience. Every death we encounter gifts us with the extension of a crack allowing light to come in so we can increasingly recognize the boundless dimension of love. Death is not a destruction—through the act of dying, we become enlightened, cognizant, and prepared. We are ready.

With every new kolo, a new lifecycle begins:

We start carefully while intently listening to the tune, trying to figure out the steps, afraid that we will make an early mistake— if we do, then kolo dies suddenly without any chance of reviving itself and we die with it, bitter and regretful. At the beginning we are still unsure, we take our time to adjust, cautious of the risks, aware of the time and space, of self and each other; we notice our surrounding, we are unsettled, but we try.

The music builds up, and kolo continues, we gather the courage to carry on, we are hopeful for a joyful, satisfying, immaculate performance, for a pattern without difficulties, but enough challenge to keep us engaged, on our toes, to keep us desiring more—and we always want more. Our connection is strong: We depend on the other bodies as much as we depend on our own. Our aches do not hurt us—we do not even feel it, our ruggedness is evening out. Eventually, we remove ourselves and we become us.

The music is faster and louder, and more distant. The sounds are overpowering, even if they are coming from afar. It seems so remote that we only feel its reverberations. Our bodies are swift, our minds are calm, our spirits are content, we are entering a vacuum without the space-time continuum—there is nothingness that surrounds us, that keeps kolo together, kolo is one, and we are kolo.

The music is so distant that our bodies start to amplify the tune. We dance and play the music with our bones and organs. Every cell in our bodies emits the same



melody, and we dance. We are moved to a dimension that extends the lifespan of kolo so we can continue to dance.

The internal music is slowing down, and our bodies follow. Kolo is ending, we are approaching the inevitable. The tune is over, and kolo is dead. We return to a previous state fuller with the experience, changed forever, still mourning the loss yet hopeful for the new beginning. With every kolo we dance, we become fuller, expanded and transformed forever. We can never go back to the previous state of being and knowing. We delve into the unknown and wait for the music to start another kolo.

New kolo is life, our new beginning, and our chance to make it better, to go further, to stay longer. What is it that we are trying to find out? What is the question for which we are holding this answer? When will we ask? Many questions are encircling us. The inquiries differ based on how we hold them and who is asking. The answers are always similar and always inside us: Love, Light, Life.

In short, love is a starting power, moving force, living authority. Love is everything in us and around us.

Light is unceasing, eternal, inner inextinguishable spirit. Even though we are born with it, we are continually finding ways to go back to it, learn from it, exhilarate it. Education is enlightenment, and light is teaching.

Life is a constant, lived experience that we fall back onto and often misconstrue. We call it beautiful, busy, we want to change it, we want it longer, we blame it for getting in the way of true desires, we try to destroy it (both human and non-human), we try to rebuild it (again both human and non-human), we contemplate and theorize about it, and we offer it as the answer.

This conclusion is not to be understood as the closure, instead as the opening. Nearly fifty years ago Alexander (1977), an American avid Balkan dancer wrote:

We continue our tireless search for what is called in Serbo-Croatian izvorni (“from the source, or spring”) culture. In this sense we are both anthropologists . . . and simple human beings who have had enough of progress and plasticity and who want to immerse ourselves in something more real, human, earthy, vibrant, in short, izvorni, before it dies out. (Alexander, 1977, as cited in Laušević, 2015, p. 229)



Since Laušević's research study focused on American fascination with Balkan dances, she argued that something "earthy," "real," and "true" that American people are missing is to be found far away in a land of peasants in the mountainous Balkans<sup>175</sup>. She also noted that American people, while acknowledging that these essentials that are missing from their lives, "can still recognize it, and save it from destruction by people who possess it but are unaware of its value" (Laušević, 2015, p. 229). Further, Michael Ginsburg, in his interview with me, observed that "American people generally don't have their own folklore, and yet they yearn it nevertheless." Is it perhaps that as global leaders in technological progress the American people might be the first to realize its detriments? I believe that the rest of the world is not too far behind and has been experiencing similar sentiments for some time now. Thus:

## **We Love Ours, We Dance Ours and Yours<sup>176</sup>**

In the final comments of a research study, the researcher usually answers the question "Now what?" Indeed, this is an important question, and I can offer that while singing songs and dancing kolos sound like joyous and inclusive activities, I am worried that being engaged in cultural activities might evoke further divisions and conflicts. Green (2004) warned us that,

On one hand ethno nationalism draws communities of interest together under the umbrella of shared culture, history and language to be a shield against the dominating and fragmenting colonial culture. Ethno-nationalism also has a racist potential, constructing the 'we' community as fundamentally racially pure and distinct from others, who are political competitors. (p. 26)

While I see my teachings as valid, I also acknowledge that unless we make conscious decisions to focus on those teachings and build communities specifically focused on interconnectedness of cultural activities, the desired outcomes will not come easy. Nevertheless, I strongly believe in this work, and as I mentioned before this is only the beginning. In the essay, "Toward the Philosophy of Integrative Education, Palmer (2010) advised that

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<sup>175</sup> "U nekoj zemlji seljaka na brdovitom Balkanu," [my translation] (Maksimović, 1941, p. 194)

<sup>176</sup> "Svoje Volimo, Naše I Vaše Igramo." [my translation].



[i]ntegrative education begins with the premise that we are embedded in a communal reality and then proceed to an epistemological assertion: we cannot know this communal reality truly and well unless we ourselves are consciously and actively in community with it as knowers. (p. 27)

Palmer continued to explain that whether we like it or not, we are in a community with reality, however, I take his words to address the necessity to work in *the community*. And that can be the community of our choice, just as long as we choose a particular community in which we will bravely engage, recognize our role and duties, accept relations, and encourage growth. I take Palmer's (2010) advice and am ready to re-vision my "understanding of what it means to know, teach, and learn" (p. 27).

With that, I circle back to what I have learned from my parents: *Svoje volimo, tuđe poštujemo*<sup>177</sup>. They based our family slogan on a well-known Yugoslavian president Tito's political message: "*Tuđe nećemo, svoje ne damo*"<sup>178</sup> as a response to the liberation of Kotor, Montenegro from the fascist occupation on November 21, 1944. They instilled in us respect for all nations and cultures.

As it is expected from every new generation to deepen their parents' teachings and further the message, I offer my teaching: *Svoje volimo, naše i vaše igramo*<sup>179</sup>:

Through music and dance, we develop curiosity, with that tolerance, and eventually acknowledgement and acceptance of other cultures.

Through the joy of singing and dancing we stimulate movements from rigid positions and with that flexibility and openness to all people.

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<sup>177</sup> In Serbian for "We love ours, we respect theirs." [my translation].

<sup>178</sup> In Serbian for "Theirs we don't want, ours we don't give." [my translation].

<sup>179</sup> In Serbian for "We love ours, we dance ours and yours." [my translation].



Through the act of holding hands, we nurture the sense of closeness and with that gradual acceptance that we are all part of the same “kolo.”

Only when we increase our dance repertoire—*truly open ourselves to cultural diversity*, we will be able to dance (in) any kolo—*acknowledge other cultures*, and learn how to engage with its rhythm—*fully accept other ways of being*. We should never forget how to dance, because our kolos remind us of who we are and make us whole.

**Figure 43**

*Serbian Days Vancouver 2022*



“This is how you change the world,” she said and tossed the pebble.

It plopped into water and we watched as the ripples spread out from the splash and ringed to the shore at our feet.

“The smallest circles first,” she said. “The smallest circles first.”  
(Wagamese, 2019, p. 80)



## Epilogue

We have arrived! Thank you for joining me on my journey. Thank you for listening to the stories, and dancing in kolo with me. For holding my hand and not letting go. Without you, kolo would not be the same. And now, “when the song pauses for the honour beats, we’ll hold high our gifts” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 384)—these three moments I experienced with others, that stand for me as the profound responses to the question of why we dance.



My oldest daughter Kalina learns to dance Čoček. It is a difficult dance, one of the hardest to master in our repertoire. It originates from South Serbia, where life is more intense than in other places. More passionate. Where people live from day to day, in uncertainty. It is an old dance, almost as old as the ground on which we dance. A lot of history is collected in that dance. Centuries of suffering and torment are woven through its steps. The female part looks cheerful, but each movement carries the bitterness of a difficult and painful past. Even today life is not easy for women there, and especially was not at the time when this dance originated.

I tell Kalina to dance “smerno” as Serbian women dance, humble yet dignified.

“Isn’t Čoček a Romani dance?” she asks. I affirm.

“So why would I dance as a Serbian woman? Am I not supposed to learn the essence, the meaning of the dance, and then offer the best interpretation of my understanding? Not to take over and dance the *Serbian way!*”

I am proud, as I notice she is beginning to understand the true nature of dance as an art form—she has found the animating spirit and is careful not to extinguish it. She is recognizing her responsibility of giving back. Even at her young age, she is acknowledging her duty and is carrying it forward. She is honouring the spirit of our Ancestors through dance, and is learning to carry it within her being as well. This knowledge is creating in her the capacity of being fully human, something that we are still endeavouring to teach and *become*, while the new generations might already *be*—respectfully celebrating the diversity among us.





I attended a Brushing Ceremony offered by Kwantlen First Nation family with my youngest daughter Ana. Chief Marilyn Gabriel and her son Michael Kelly Gabriel welcomed us to the space. Although set up in the new SFU Sustainable Energy Engineering building, by bringing the traditional protocols forward, they transformed the atrium into a longhouse. We were their guests and they welcomed us into their home. As we arrived, I felt the warmth I feel when I enter a friend's place. I was glad that Ana was there with me.

While the atmosphere was pleasing and inviting, I have noticed that the space was still somehow divided—the Kwantlen family was sitting on the bleachers and the guests were across on the chairs. Chief Marilyn was speaking standing in the centre. While she spoke about her family, community, history, she moved through the space. Her prominent presence and her bighearted words were connecting us. With her stories, she moved through and among us. She spoke how her community felt the consequences of our common history. She did not speak about pain and suffering, about stealing the land and stealing the children. She did not speak about the atrocities they endured and survived. She did not need to, we all knew. She spoke about their healing. She spoke about our collective healing. She spoke about the future. I recognized the immense generosity in their efforts in bringing us together. Nothing can erase the past, but we can all, individually and collectively, heal together. She brought her family to share their protocols and invite us into this space together to create a living common ground as a community. A community that will grow, that will connect our worldviews and our ways of being.

Among the family members was a young Healer who offered to do the sacred work of the Brushing Ceremony for all of us present. We were invited to participate. We all stood up from our seats and moved through the space. We were offered to physically and symbolically enter the common ground. The Kwantlen family created an opening inviting us to experience a worldview seemingly unlike ours. Oh, how glad I was that Ana was there with me.

While we waited in line for our turn to be brushed, cleared, and cleansed, I watched the people around me. Some appeared nervous, some were more relaxed,





maybe familiar with the ceremony. One by one, we each stepped in front of the Healer. Holding the bunches of cedar boughs, his motions were gentle, precise, careful, persuasive. It felt as if the cedar boughs were extensions of his hands, his fingers. He moved through the space with precise agility. The tips of the cedar boughs gently touched our foreheads, noses, cheeks, and necks, swiping the worries away. He brushed the heaviness off our shoulders. Weight from our chests. He asked us to extend our hands. He asked us to turn around. The cedar boughs brushed our hair and backs. With determination and strong swipes, he brushed our legs and feet aiding us to ground ourselves, to reconnect to the earth. With every stroke he made, he brushed away tension, hurt, or harm and in doing so, gifted us with the purity and healing that helps heal our minds, clear our bodies, and restore our spirits. I felt as he brushed us, as he gifted us, that a part of him was filling with our energy he was receiving and releasing through the sacred cedar into the world to be washed away or dispersed.

I watched him brush a few last people. I could see the changes, the energy that was boiling in him. He finished brushing the last person, and the drummers sang another song. Instead of going back to his seat, he began to sway and move. He rhythmically raised his arms and lifted his feet to the sounding drums. Suddenly his energy burst free into a dance. As the drummers were finishing their song and ready to close, they grasped that the Healer was dancing. They swiftly repositioned encircling him, and with great care continued to drum for him. His family surrounded him singing and drumming, bringing the spirits of their Ancestors with them to protect him. They created a space to support him, to raise him up, and to honour him. They saw him enter his dance and they responded to his needs. He danced and danced. His eyes were closed and his arms extended. He twirled releasing the accumulated energy. He danced for all of us. He danced, bringing us closer to the spirit. He danced, offering us a profound teaching in his dance.

The family's drumming intensified. We all rose pulsing the rhythm with our hands. The rhythm was strong and animated. Through the rhythm we joined the circle, we became the family. Through the rhythm we embraced the Healer. We were all acknowledging his act and offering with all our hearts: we got you, you are dancing for us and we are receiving your gift. He connected us. We were part of the circle that created a safe space for him to carry out what the spirit had asked him to do his way of honouring the work. He danced and through his dance he healed himself and all those



gathered who witnessed the moment. I closed my eyes picturing myself dancing with him. I imagined dancing in kolo, circling around the Healer and the drummers. The drums were sounding its healing power. We danced Vlaške stomping heavily. As I imagined that possibility I wept. I wept and wept, embarrassing Ana. I wept for the divinity of the moment, for all the anguish we experienced, for our Ancestors and our Descendants. I wept for all who will never see the young Healer dance his first healing dance.

I was so glad that Ana was there with me. She is young and she is learning. Together, we witnessed the Healer honour the spirit that moved him through his dance and celebrated the healing of us all, as family.



Saša and I went mountaineering with an ex-Yugoslavian group. It was a cold, clear skies day, ideal for exploring the local mountains. The group was mixed with some beginners and some more experienced climbers. The climb proved to be harder than we anticipated: the snow was melting in the sun and instantly freezing in the shade, forming a layer of ice on the trails. The group was losing the initial enthusiasm, and we were moving slowly. We decided to reduce the planned route. We reached the highest peak we could for the day. Exhausted, we threw ourselves to the ground and lay in the sun catching our breaths. Slowly we started getting up noticing the nature around us. Even though most of our group have climbed that peak before, the divine beauty that surrounded us was spectacular.

Standing at the highest point for many kilometres around, we witnessed one of the most magnificent created landscapes on Mother Earth. Overwhelmed with the majestic view, we were humbled. We sat in silence unable to articulate the gratitude for the profound moment we were experiencing together, thankful for the splendor we absorbed, for the gift we received. The wind was blowing around us, raising snow that was glistening in the sun. The mountain spirits were present. One of the group members Zoltan, found the music on his phone and played kolo Moravac. Impulsively, we all rose, grabbed each other hands, and at an elevation of 1400 meters, we danced in kolo.

“Ahhhh,” Nataša sighs deeply, “It’s been so long since we held hands!”



We danced with the sun on our faces. We danced with an icy wind in our hair. We danced, grateful for all the gifts we have received. We danced together, not ready to let go. Through our dance, we honoured the spirits of this land, the Ancestors, and all our relations. We offered what we had —kolo. In kolo, we let the spirit guide us.

Maybe that is the reason we dance...

To celebrate the living legacy of our Ancestors, to be together,  
and to become whole again.

**Figure 44**  
*Seymour Kolo*



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